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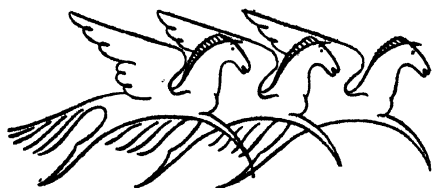




# THE NOVELIST AS THINKER

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## C O N T E N T S

FOREWORD	7
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### SYMPOSIUM: THE NOVELIST AS THINKER

Aldous Huxley and the Dissociation of Personality	<i>D. S. Savage</i>	9
The Innocence of Evelyn Waugh	<i>D. S. Savage</i>	34
The Novels of Christopher Isherwood	<i>G. H. Bantock</i>	46
The Novels of L. H. Myers	<i>G. H. Bantock</i>	57
Sartre and Society	<i>Thomas Good</i>	75
Mauriac's Dark Hero	<i>Wallace Fowlie</i>	92

### POETRY:

The Terms of Self	<i>Clifford Collins</i>	107
The Skeletal Tree	<i>Clifford Collins</i>	111
Ophelia	<i>Clifford Collins</i>	111
Seven Poems	<i>E. E. Cummings</i>	112
Three Poems	<i>B. Rajan</i>	116
Contrast for November	<i>Byron Vazakas</i>	120
Cradled in Grave of Grief	<i>C. Busby Smith</i>	121

### SHORT STORY:

You Never Go Back to Sleep	<i>Arthur Mizener</i>	123
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### CRITICISM:

Literature as an Institution	<i>Harry Levin</i>	140
The Literary Situation in America	<i>Andrews Wanning</i>	154

NEW CONTRIBUTORS	167
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## FOREWORD

THE symposium in this issue of *Focus* has been called *The Novelist as Thinker* though at least two of the articles in it are concerned less with the novelist's thought than with his lack of it. Moreover none of the essays were written to match this title. They seem to justify it because of their common interest in the novelist's 'theme', or 'message', or 'ideas', and because of their tendency to treat the traditional categories of criticism—plot, characterization and the novelist's use of language—as derivations from this central reality.

This trend in criticism is plain enough and deserves to be questioned a little more than hitherto. It has the merit of providing a context for criticism—the novelist's work is unified by his values—and at its best it can interpret the structure of each novel as the product of those values and their literary potency. But there are occasions more frequent with more successful writers, when the meaning of a novel cannot be worked out from any 'thematic' nucleus and 'philosophic' critics may then very well be tempted to discard the novel in favour of the nucleus. Some parts of this volume succumb to this temptation and others are concerned less with literary criticism than with the annotation by literature of their social and moral philosophy. But such failures should not blind us to the importance of the problem they assert. The effect of a writer's beliefs on the structure of the novels which dramatize them, and in addition the power of certain beliefs to form and animate an artistic meaning, are matters which demand to be seriously discussed. This book may not define these relationships satisfactorily but it is at any rate alive to their significance.

The next issue of *Focus* will be devoted to modern American poetry. There will be separate essays on the poetry of Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, the Imagists, Wallace Stevens and E. E. Cummings as well as an anthology of new American verse. Contributions to subsequent issues of *Focus* are invited and should be sent to the editor at Trinity College, Cambridge. We hope that we have demonstrated our readiness to print serious criticism irrespective of its viewpoint; but we do not

## The Novelist as Thinker

and at first glance strangely altered Huxley, would wish rather pointedly to dissociate himself. ✓ To-day there confronts us, not the sardonic portrayer of futility, but the prophet and the philosopher of Enlightenment, of Liberation, through a species of mystical contemplation. And this prophet, or teacher, quite overshadows, if he has not finally eliminated, the artist. ✓

✓ What in fact is the nature of the teaching which emerges? It is rather a simple doctrine. Man's final end, according to Huxley's most recent work, a compendium entitled *The Perennial Philosophy* (1946), is nothing less than 'unitive love-knowledge of the Divine Ground', a knowledge which one must attain by 'making oneself loving, pure in heart and poor in spirit', through 'a discipline more arduous and unremitting than any imposed by ecclesiastical authority'—a discipline which involves, indeed, a 'total dying to self'.

Salvation, deliverance, enlightenment are apostrophized; but always the emphasis, in this version of mysticism, is upon self-obliteration; and self-obliteration, it appears, in an impassive, non-personal, not-God (as with strange candour the 'Divine Ground' is here described). Time and all its works, being evil, must be annihilated: the goal is *Nirvana*, complete cessation of the pain which comes through individuation, separation from the abysmal One. ✓

Man must live in time in order to be able to advance into eternity, no longer on the animal, but on the spiritual level; he must be conscious of himself as a separate ego in order to be able consciously to transcend separate selfhood; he must do battle with the lower self in order that he may become identified with that higher Self within him, which is akin to the divine Not-Self; and finally he must make use of his cleverness in order to pass beyond cleverness to the intellectual vision of Truth, the immediate, unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground.

The mystics—Catholic, Quaker, Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Sufi, and the rest—have pointed out the way; Huxley annotates it: we refuse to follow at our peril.

Whether in fact the new doctrine can be so completely dissociated from its literary antecedents is something which we owe it to truth and to ourselves to investigate rather than to take on trust. A hundred years ago Søren Kierkegaard in a masterly essay categorically described the fundamental disorientation which

afflicts all human existence not lived under the rubric, Faith, as the 'sickness unto death'; the sickness unto death being—despair.\* To designate Aldous Huxley as the novelist of despair—if despair is the emotional potentiation of futility, the central theme of his work—will seem unquestionably fitting to the earlier 'Pyrrhonic aesthete', and if it should arouse some surprise, here and there, when applied with even greater emphasis to the later Huxley, in his 'Perennial' avatar, that surprise will, I trust, be modified in the light of what is said below.

That there is, in reality, more than a marked affinity between Huxley's earlier and his later work and ideas we shall discover if, disregarding whatever overt attitudes the abstract theorist would have us accept, we scrutinize the underlying structure of the novelist's and the thinker's world. The fictional universe which he creates and populates possesses certain well-defined features which might all be said to be explicable in the light of a fundamental *discontinuity*. If we say of Huxley's characters that they are static and isolated, that a certain impersonal detachment shows itself in their creator's attitude towards them, and that at the same time their existence presumes a context of pointlessness, we shall have sketched a readily recognizable picture of Huxley's constant frame of reference. For, by a curious irony, while Huxley himself would claim a radical discontinuity between the divergent attitudes to life—'Pyrrhonic hedonism' and contemplative mysticism—which in turn grow out of and condition his earlier and his later work, in fact the two originate in a common dislocation of being; the one exaggeration of attitude finds its balancing counterpart in the other; and the irony is pointed in the fact that discontinuity itself can even be said to be the only continuous factor in decisive operation throughout Huxley's artistic career. Huxley's development follows, not a spiral but an hour-glass pattern. The psychological structure underlying *Crome Yellow*, *Antic Hay*, and *Those Barren Leaves* becomes modified as the novelist's dissatisfaction with his non-committal relationship to life draws him towards a closer engagement, only to reassert itself with finality as he crosses over into a yet further detachment which is the obverse of the earlier attitude, and which reinforces its pronounced bias towards the impersonal, the non-human.



I

The mental structure upon which Huxley was to raise his successive fictional edifices is discoverable with little difficulty in his first novel, *Crome Yellow* (1921). A dualism of mind and matter, of the ideal and the actual, is fundamental to it, and is the source at once of Huxley's pessimism, of the purely static and episodic quality of his work, and of his humour. Futility and frustration, humorously presented, the disparity between intention and accomplishment, are the themes of this slight, episodic narrative which tells of a short holiday spent by a young poet, Denis, at the country house of Crome, during the course of which he encounters a succession of interestingly odd characters, is pursued by a young female while himself unsuccessfully pursuing another, and eventually allows himself to be bundled off for home just as he seems to be within reach of amorous success. The appropriate note is struck in the opening paragraph:

Oh, this journey! It was two hours cut clean out of his life; two hours in which he might have done so much, so much—written the perfect poem, for example, or read the one illuminating book. Instead of which—his gorge rose at the smell of the dusty cushions against which he was leaning. . . .

And it is maintained with fair consistency throughout.

The character of Denis is indeterminate. He is young and very uncertain of his own feelings and beliefs, and is moreover somewhat isolated from human contacts. Denis's response to living is involuntarily moralistic; theoretically he is a hedonist:

'I've always taken things as they come', said Anne. 'It seems so obvious. One enjoys the pleasant things, avoids the nasty ones. There's nothing more to be said.'

'Nothing—for you. But, then, you were born a pagan. I am trying laboriously to make myself one. I can take nothing for granted, I can enjoy nothing as it comes along. Beauty, pleasure, art, women—I have to invent an excuse, a justification for everything that's delightful. Otherwise I can't enjoy it with an easy conscience. . . . Pleasure is one of the mystical roads to union with the infinite—the ecstasies of drinking, dancing, love-making. As for women, I am perpetually assuring myself that they're the broad highway to divinity. And to think that I'm only just beginning to see through the silliness of the whole thing!'

Of Huxley's two themes, the first, the disparity of the ideal and the actual, is expressed characteristically in the account from Mr Wimbush's 'History of Crome', of the Elizabethan baronet's sanitary arrangements; 'the necessities of nature are so base and brutish that in obeying them we are apt to forget that we are the noblest creatures of the universe', so that accordingly the privy must be a book-lined room at the top of the house, commanding 'an extensive and noble prospect'. It finds expression also in the interpolated anecdote of the three lovely sisters who in public maintained a pretence of wan, ethereal spirituality, while surreptitiously gorging themselves at elaborate private repasts in their chamber. Huxley's second theme, his coupling of a deliberate hedonism with an underlying sense of personal futility, is asserted in this novel by Mr Scogan:

'Worried about the cosmos, eh?' Mr Scogan patted him on the arm. 'I know the feeling', he said. 'It's a most distressing symptom. "What's the good of continuing to function if one's doomed to be snuffed out at last along with everything else?" Yes, yes, I know exactly how you feel. It's most distressing if one allows oneself to be distressed. But then why allow oneself to be distressed? After all, we all know that there's no ultimate point. But what difference does that make?'

We shall see that throughout his successive works Huxley has never departed from these foundations.

*Antic Hay* (1923) is at once more serious and more farcical, a mordant blaze of characters and incidents against a starker background of futility. Yet there is a pronounced thread of morality running through the tale's desperate gaiety. When we are introduced first to Theodore Gumbriel we find him 'speculating, in his rapid and rambling way about the existence and the nature of God', and then, a little later, disturbed by a pricking conscience over his 'first serious and deliberate lie'—in childhood.

The element of broad farce enters with Gumbriel's invention and marketing of trousers with pneumatic seats. On the strength of his hopes from this venture he leaves his job as schoolmaster and embarks upon a random course of dissipation, during which he encounters such exponents of depravity as Myra Viveash, whose voice 'seemed always on the point of expiring, as though each word were the last, uttered faintly and breakingly from a

## The Novelist as Thinker

death-bed . . .'; Coleman, whose career of debauchery is carried out on principle and is accompanied by blasphemy; and Mr Mercaptan, whose speciality is seduction according to the precepts of Crebillon *filz*, upon a white satin sofa in his tastefully decorated apartment. The thread of quasi-moral narrative—that which concerns Gumbriel's relations of simple, genuine affection with the girl Emily, whom he is led to abandon at a whim of Mrs Viveash's—is slight in proportion to the whole novel, which concerns the erratic futilities of Gumbriel and the others as they are whirled around in the dry wind of boredom, vanity, and despair.

Beneath the amusing surface there is a clear enunciation of the theme of futility:

'It's appalling, it's horrible', said Gumbriel at last, after a long, long silence, during which he had, indeed, been relishing to the full the horror of it all. Life, don't you know . . .'

And when, after his betrayal of Emily, he goes, with Mrs Viveash, the dreary, anguished, pleasure-hunting round of night clubs in an episode which palely reflects the Walpurgis-nacht scenes of *Ulysses*, the night perpetuates itself with yet further revelations of human depravity and the farcical pointlessness of things, until finally:

'To-morrow', said Gumbriel at last, meditatively.

'To-morrow', Mrs Viveash interrupted him, 'will be as awful as to-day.' She breathed it like a truth from beyond the grave prematurely revealed, expiringly from her death-bed within.

*Those Barren Leaves* (1925), the novel following, is the first to be written from a serious questioning of life. The three major characters among the company assembled at the wealthy Mrs Aldwinkle's Italian villa are Cardan, Chelifer, and Calamy, the disenchanted man of the world, whose temper provides a point of location for the mood of the book. All three share a common disillusionment with the human state. But whereas Cardan has pursued to the end a course of genial parasitical pleasure-seeking, Chelifer is a self-torturing romantic who takes a perverse delight in seeking out and identifying himself with life's most dingy aspects, while Calamy himself has simply wearied of the amorous round of the idle, affluent set, and is on the verge of a vaguely-envisioned quest for the 'way'.

'... It seems to me', says Calamy, when Mr Cardan, true to character, is praising 'love' as the most enjoyable of indoor sports, '... that I'm beginning to have had enough of sports, whether indoor or out-of-door. I'd like to find some more serious occupation.' And he continues, in response to Mr Cardan's profession of a-morality, in this vein:

'You're fortunate. . . . It's not all of us whose personalities have such a natural odour of sanctity that they can disinfect our septic actions and render them morally harmless. When I do something stupid or dirty I can't help feeling that it is stupid or dirty. My soul lacks virtues to make it wise or clean. And I can't dissociate myself from what I do. I wish I could. One does such a devilish number of stupid things. Things one doesn't want to do. If only one could be a hedonist and only do what was pleasant! But to be a hedonist one must be wholly rational; there's no such thing as a genuine hedonist, there never has been. Instead of doing what one wants to do or what would give one pleasure, one drifts through existence doing exactly the opposite, most of the time—doing what one has no desire to do, following insane promptings that lead one, fully conscious, into every sort of discomfort, misery, boredom and remorse. . . . I don't like running after women, I don't like wasting my time in futile social intercourse, or in the pursuit of what is technically known as pleasure. And yet for some reason and quite against my will I find myself passing the greater part of my time immersed in precisely these occupations. It's an obscure kind of insanity. . . . And what's the most depressing of all . . . is the feeling that one will go on like this for ever, in the teeth of every effort to stop. I sometimes wish I weren't externally free. For then at any rate I should have something to curse at, for getting in my way, other than my own self. Yes, positively, I sometimes wish I were a navvy.'

Mr Cardan, for his part, remains the advocate of the hedonism criticized by Calamy. But he is forced continually to realize that he is in a blind alley, finding, towards the end of his career of pleasure, only bodily decrepitude and death. Alone, his reflections tend to take on a morbid tinge:

It would be tiresome to end one's days with recurrent fever and an enlarged spleen. It would be tiresome, for that matter, to end one's days anyhow, in one's bed or out, naturally or unnaturally, by the act of God or of the King's enemies. Mr Cardan's thoughts took on, all at once, a dismal complexion. Old age, sickness, de-

## The Novelist as Thinker

crepitude; the bath-chair, the doctor, the bright efficient nurse; and the long agony, the struggle for breath, the thickening darkness, the end, and then—how did that merry little song go?

More work for the undertaker,  
'Nother little job for the coffin-maker.  
At the local cemetery they are  
Very, very busy with a brand new grave.  
He'll keep warm next winter.

Mr Cardan hummed the tune to himself cheerfully enough. But his tough, knobbly face became so hard, so strangely still, an expression of such bitterness, such a profound melancholy, appeared in his winking and his supercilious eye, that it would have frightened a man to look at him.

The tone then is markedly more serious. And for the first time we find the disparity fundamental to Huxley's outlook emphasized as a cleavage between 'the flesh' and 'the spirit'. Thus, while Chelifer derives a mordant satisfaction from the ironic contrast which he delights to point between man's aspirations and the brute facts of his animal existence, the elderly Mr Cardan's ruminations take a melancholy turn, and the disparity is seen like this:

✓ Only the tragedy of the spirit can liberate and uplift. But the greatest tragedy of the spirit is that sooner or later it succumbs to the flesh. Sooner or later every soul is stifled by the sick body; sooner or later there are no more thoughts, but only pain and vomitings and stupor. The tragedies of the spirit are mere struttings and posturings on the margin of life, and the spirit itself is only an accidental exuberance, the products of spare vital energy, like the feathers on the head of a hoopoe or the innumerable populations of useless and foredoomed spermatozoa. The spirit has no significance; there is only the body. When it is young, the body is beautiful and strong. It grows old, its joints creak, it becomes dry and smelly; it breaks down, the life goes out of it and it rots away. However lovely the feathers on a bird's head, they perish with it; and the spirit, which is a lovelier ornament than any, perishes too. The farce is hideous, thought Mr Cardan, and in the worst of bad taste.

But at this point we must pause to collect the threads which have so far been taken up, in order to trace them to their common centre in that basic disjunction of personality which is the psychological source of all the disjunctions in the Huxley world-picture. Let us begin with the two principal obsessions which have so clearly emerged this far—'hedonism' and 'futility'.

Huxley's central character, whichever of his books we take up, is remarkable primarily for placing so little value upon his existence as a man that he is implicitly prepared to forgo his claim to personal destiny and meaning, albeit with an uneasy conscience, for the immediate gain of a random succession of disrelated sensations. Inwardly inert, led this way and that by mere appetite, he becomes immersed consequently in a world which is deprived of value. Unaware that meaning and purpose do not reside as objective facts in the world of things but are interior realities which await for their realization upon interior dynamic movement, oblivious to the truth that personality is not a substance with which we are endowed by nature, but an inward integration which may be achieved only by the decisive choice of oneself, he arbitrarily attributes his own purposelessness to the universe as a whole. 'Hedonism' and 'futility' thus complement each other.

In *Crome Yellow* the chief character, Denis, is young, his hedonism an aspect of the common bewilderment of youth. Gumbriel, in the second novel, is an older man, and hedonism takes on a cynical tinge, while futility is emphasized. Calamy, in the present novel, represents a further stage still—he is the disillusioned hedonist; and now the disparity of the Huxley world is presented from a new aspect. As a disillusioned hedonist Calamy has wearied of a life without *meaning*, he is beginning to look for another path, and hence the concept 'spirit' for the first time makes its appearance; but 'spirit' itself, superimposed upon the existing psychological pattern, takes the impress of the fundamental duality of mind, and appears as directly antithetical to 'matter', or 'the flesh', as something in some way beyond the limits of the sensual plane upon which human life is actually lived. Thus we find that Calamy unquestioningly assumes that the 'way' of which he is in quest must lie somewhere beyond the region of ordinary human experience, and that it is to be found in opposition to the path of sensual indulgence from which that experience is inseparable.

He speaks in this manner to Chelifer and Mr Cardan just prior to his departure for the mountain retreat:

' . . . there is a whole universe within me, unknown and waiting to be explored; a whole universe that can only be approached by way of introspection and patient uninterrupted thought. Merely to satisfy curiosity it would surely be worth exploring. But there are motives more impelling than curiosity to persuade me. What one

## The Novelist as Thinker

may find there is so important that it's almost a matter of life and death to undertake the search.'

'H'm', said Mr Cardan. 'And what will happen at the end of three months' chaste meditation when some lovely young temptation comes toddling down this road, "balancing her haunches", as Zola would say, and rolling the large black eye? What will happen to your explorations of the inward universe then, may I ask?'

'Well', said Calamy, 'I hope they'll proceed uninterrupted.'

'You hope? Piously?'

'And I shall certainly do my best to see that they do', Calamy added.

'It won't be easy', Mr Cardan assured him.

'I know.'

'Perhaps you'll find that you can explore simultaneously both the temptation and the interior universe.'

Calamy shook his head. 'Alas, I'm afraid that's not practicable. It would be delightful if it were. But for some reason it isn't. Even in moderation it won't do. I know that, more or less, by experience. And the authorities are all agreed about it.'

✓ This brings us at last to the structure of Huxley's novels, all of which—it is one of their principal defects—are remarkable for their lack of total dramatic movement and impetus. And this is precisely explicable as a consequence of the absence of dynamic movement in the mind of the novelist himself, a defect which is naturally communicated to his creatures, whose intercourse with each other, prepared and sustained by the accidents of social life, is virtually confined, as we have often heard it remarked, to sexuality and cerebration. No character in the course of this novel undergoes any modifications of outlook or temperament; each remains immobile within the limits marked out for it from the first. We know nothing of the particular events and motives which move Calamy towards the tentative renunciation which begins to take effect at the novel's close. Mr Cardan is a lay figure as rigid as any in a morality play, and Chelifer is a study only in deliberate self-stultification. And such figures as the doctrinaire socialist, Mr Falx, and the preposterous Mrs Aldwinkle herself, are merely caricatures sardonically sketched by the satirist of social types. Only with the immature—in this case with Irene and the young Lord Hovingden, in their naïvely innocent courtship—does the novelist show any movement of human sympathy. Between such inwardly static characters, it is clear, there can be

no dramatic interplay and thus no movement of the novel as an entity. Hence, instead of the movement of life, we are presented with episodes, blocks of incident and conversation broken up peremptorily by external change.

But this is something which deserves further exploration, for it is evidently bound up with the whole question of movement and purpose. Movement in a work of fiction is required, of course, to be significant—to bear some purposeful relation to an end. In that vivid portrayal of purposeless activity, *Antic Hay*, the dance of futility is necessarily non-dramatic and presupposes the stasis of character—which in turn is static just because, according to the context, the possibility of purposeful movement is non-existent; life itself is purposeless. In the succeeding novel there is some endeavour to move beyond this static condition dictated by life's total futility. Yet all that the novel succeeds in doing in this respect is to lay bare at great length the absolute cleavage between 'matter' and 'spirit' which underlies the idea of pointlessness. Nowhere in it is there any questioning of the reality and the appropriateness of this dualism.

The novel ends inconclusively. Calamy retires to his mountain retreat, but it is uncertain whither his lonely quest will lead him; whether, indeed, it will lead anywhere. All we are told is that, looking at the distant skyline, he feels 'somehow reassured'.

## II

That there is a progression of a sort within the first three novels is clear. And while *Point Counter Point* (1928) seems to show a divergence from what was later to appear as Huxley's main line of development, it nevertheless derives from the same basic pattern (though with a different emphasis) while continuing the movement towards human responsibility already hinted at in the portrait of Calamy.

That *Point Counter Point* represents a movement away from the detached manipulation of puppet-characters towards a sympathetic approach to human life is a fact not entirely contradicted by the novel's ill-success in this aim, which is most signally exhibited by the emergence in its pages, for the first time, of a patently deliberate autobiographical character, the novelist Philip Quarles, whose personal views and problems, identical with Huxley's own, are placed directly before us.



## The Novelist as Thinker

The central problem in Philip Quarles's life is his personal isolation; 'All his life long he had walked in a solitude, in a private void, into which nobody, not his mother, not his friends, not his lovers had ever been permitted to enter'.

Although, we are given to understand, he is a man of exceptional intellectual endowments, his convictions are fluid, his response to life indeterminate:

If there was any single way of life he could lastingly believe in, it was that mixture of pyrrhonism and stoicism which had struck him, an enquiring schoolboy among the philosophers, as the height of human wisdom and into whose mould of sceptical indifference he had poured his unimpassioned adolescence. Against the pyrrhonian suspense of judgment and the stoical imperturbability he had often rebelled. But had the rebellion ever been really serious? Pascal had made him a Catholic—but only so long as the volume of *Pensées* was open before him. There were moments when, in the company of Carlyle or Whitman or bouncing Browning, he had believed in strenuousness for strenuousness' sake. And then there was Mark Rampion. After a few hours in Mark Rampion's company he really believed in noble savagery; he felt convinced that the proudly conscious intellect ought to humble itself a little and admit the claims of the heart, eye and the bowels, the loins, the bones and skin and muscles, to a fair share of life.

This last sentence provides the clue to the book's central 'idea'—a variation on the spirit-flesh duality, but with the scales weighted this time towards the 'flesh'—not now in the name of an irresponsible hedonism but of a biological vitalism obviously borrowed, in large measure, from D. H. Lawrence, who is here caricatured admiringly in the painter, Mark Rampion. The following is a sample of Rampion's remarks:

'This damned soul', he went on, 'this damned abstract soul—it's like a kind of cancer, eating up the real, human, natural reality, spreading and spreading at its expense. Why can't he be content with reality, your stupid old Beethoven? Why should he find it necessary to replace the real, warm, natural thing by this abstract cancer of a soul? The cancer may have a beautiful shape; but, damn it all, the body's more beautiful. I don't want your spiritual cancer.'

The spirit-matter dualism has not been resolved, but instead of an orientation towards the spirit *à la* Calamy, we have, not

indeed a despairing acceptance of the futility of sensual-human life, but an attempt at its justification in terms of nature, vitality, health. Thus, to take but one typical example:

John Bidlake [a sexagenarian philanderer] made no apologies for the kind of love he had to offer. So far as it went, it entirely justified itself. A healthy sensualist, he made his love straightforwardly, naturally, with the good animal gusto of a child of nature.

. . . It was a love without pretensions, but warm, natural, and, being natural, good so far as it went—a decent, good-humoured, happy sensuality.

This novel, however, shows Huxley at his most inept. Badly constructed, incoherent, puerile in conception and presentation, and written in shoddy journalese, it reveals the fatal juvenility which, beneath the sophisticated surface, vitiates his understanding of life. Huxley's attempt to extend his inherently limited range of characterization results in his crowding these pages with flat caricatures of living personages, whose characters and activities are interpreted in terms no more searching than their relationship, 'wholesome' or 'perverted', to sex and physical life. With the conclusion of the novelette called *Brave New World* (1932)—a satirical projection into the future of the way of life implicit in a deliberate hedonism, which need not concern us here—the shadow of D. H. Lawrence lifts from Huxley's pages, and with his next work we are back to the main line of his development: to the haunting preoccupation with the futility of life and the possibility of finding a way of escape from its pointlessness and tedium.

### III

Four years after *Brave New World* and eight after *Point Counter Point* there appeared Huxley's crucial novel, *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936); crucial, because it represents a direct attempt to deal with the problems raised by his earlier works, and because it stands at the mid-point of his career as a novelist. Here the characters, previously formalized to excess, gain in definition and humanity, and genuine drama begins to emerge, centring around the autobiographical figure of the writer, Anthony Beavis, and his movement from a self-indulgent, cynical detachment towards personal regeneration and the acceptance of human responsibility.

The autobiographical novelist-character in *Point Counter Point*,

## The Novelist as Thinker

we have seen, was signally isolated from the world, from other persons. The following extract from his notebook links him indubitably with Anthony Beavis, who has come to precisely the same realization, and who, moreover, takes at last the hazardous step of implementing it in action:

'Till quite recently, I must confess [Philip Quarles writes], I took learning and philosophy and science—all the activities that are magniloquently lumped under the title of "The Search for Truth"—very seriously. I regarded the Search for Truth as the highest of human tasks and the Searchers as the noblest of men. But in the last year or so I have begun to see that this famous Search for Truth is just an amusement, a distraction like any other, a rather refined and elaborate substitute for genuine living; and that Truth-Searchers become just as silly, infantile and corrupt in their way as the boozers, the pure aesthetes, the business men, the Good-Timers in theirs. . . . Shall I ever have the strength of mind to break myself of these indolent habits of intellectualism and devote my energies to the more serious and difficult task of living integrally?'

The personal theme of *Eyeless in Gaza* is Anthony's realization of the fatal error which has distorted and vitiated his life as a human being; but there is also an impersonal theme—that of the process of time. Once more the opening paragraph sets the key:

The snapshots had become almost as dim as memories. This young woman who had stood in a garden at the turn of the century was like a ghost at cock-crow. His mother, Anthony Beavis recognized. A year or two, perhaps only a month or two, before she died. . . .

And the structure of the novel, the erratic alternation of pages from the remote past, the near past and the present of Anthony's history, while it reveals the temporal preoccupation, at the same time perfectly expresses the essential discontinuity of Anthony's existence as a result of his crucial, though always unacknowledged, refusal to go forward to claim his personal destiny as a human being, to 'become himself'.

Anthony has chosen not to be humanly responsible, chosen not only 'the part of the detached philosopher' but of the detached sensualist, desiring neither to love nor to be loved. The crisis in his life occurs on his forty-second birthday when, with his mistress of the moment, Helen—who happens to be the daughter of a former mistress, Mary Amberley—he is lying on the roof of

his retreat in southern France, 'in a golden stupor of sunlight and fulfilled desire'. Despite his volition, his wish to sever himself from his past and to live only in the immediate enjoyment of the present, perspectives of memory, invoked by this and that apparently trivial sense-association, persistently open up before him:

Even the seemingly solid fragments of present reality are riddled with pitfalls. What could be more uncompromisingly *there*, in the present, than a woman's body in the sunshine? And yet it had betrayed him. The firm ground of its sensual immediacy and of his own physical tenderness had opened beneath his feet and precipitated him into another time and place. Nothing was safe. Even this skin had the scent of smoke under the sea. This living skin, this present skin; but it was nearly twenty years since Brian's death. . . . What if that picture gallery had been recorded and stored away in the cellars of his mind for the sole and express purpose of being brought up into consciousness at this present moment? Brought up, to-day, when he was forty-two and secure, forty-two and fixed, unchangeably himself, brought up along with those critical years of his adolescence, along with the woman who had been his teacher, his first mistress, and was now a hardly human creature festering to death, alone, in a dirty burrow? And what if that absurd childish game with the flints had had a point, a profound purpose, which was simply to be recollected here on this blazing roof, now as his lips made contact with Helen's sun-warmed flesh? In order that he might be forced, in the midst of this act of detached and irresponsible sensuality, to think of Brian and of the things that Brian had lived for; yes, and had died for—died for, another image suddenly reminded him, at the foot of just such a cliff as that beneath which they had played as children in the chalk pit. Yes, even Brian's suicide, he now realized with horror, even the poor huddled body on the rocks, was mysteriously implicit in this hot skin.

Anthony's spiritual crisis, its antecedents and outcome, has been subterraneously prepared out of his unwilling but inescapable realization of the treacherous quality of time, with its accompaniments, age and death; and this is reproduced in the narrative, which takes us consecutively through various stages of Anthony's history, always returning to the point of departure—the sunlit roof. It is precipitated by the shock of an unexpected and startling incident. Out of an aeroplane flying immediately above there falls a yelping dog, to drop like a missile on to the roof, spattering the

## The Novelist as Thinker

reclining lovers with its blood. Recovering from the shock, Anthony feebly passes it off as a joke, but 'For all answer, Helen covered her face with her hands and began to sob'.

For a moment Anthony stood quite still, looking at her crouched there, in the hopeless abjection of her blood-stained nakedness, listening to the painful sound of her weeping. 'Like seccotine': his own words re-echoed disgracefully in his ears. Pity stirred within him, and then an almost violent movement of love for this hurt and suffering woman, this *person*, yes, this person whom he had ignored, deliberately, as though she had no existence except in the context of pleasure. Now, as she knelt there sobbing, all the tenderness he had ever felt for her body, all the affection implicit in their sensualities and never expressed, seemed suddenly to discharge themselves, in a kind of lightning flash of accumulated feeling, upon this person, this embodied spirit, weeping in solitude behind concealing hands.

He knelt down beside her on the mattress, and, with a gesture that was meant to express all that he now felt, put an arm round her shoulder.

But at his touch she winced away as if from a defilement. With a violent, shuddering movement she shook her head.

This is the crisis which jerks Anthony into an abrupt awareness of his mistaken path. The rest of the novel conducts us through the corridors of Anthony's past history, his long, mistaken path being traced to its primal root in his early liaison with Mary Amberley, by whom he is idly prompted to betray his friend's trust and ultimately to cause Brian's suicide, by wantonly seducing the girl to whom he is betrothed; while concurrently, we are shown his later progress towards responsible participation in human affairs and the eventual acceptance of an ascetic, neo-Buddhist 'spirituality'.

The story, written with manifest sincerity, is a serious attempt to state a genuine human predicament and to find a way around it. Yet the statement, and the solution, when all is allowed, leave one with a disturbed feeling that all is not well, that somewhere there is a hiatus, a dislocation and a spiritual failure.

Anthony's conversion takes place at the point where he is abruptly made to realize that he has denied the inwardness of another person; that he has denied love for the sake of a detached sensuality. But as the narrative proceeds, we become aware that

his personal discovery of love is turning from its proper object and becoming generalized, at first into hypothetical beneficence for humanity and at last into a cold moralism which derives its sanctions from a peculiarly impersonal metaphysic.

Returning to the antecedents of his conversion, we find that the tentative emotion of love (for Helen) becomes confused and finally submerged in the emotion of disgust (for Helen's mother, his once charming mistress, now a drunkard, a dope-addict, a squalid wreck). Simultaneously, this disgust fuses with the horror of time, of the accumulation of moments which leads inexorably to decay and death. The horror of time, as it accumulates in human life as age, is in turn associated with disgust for the physical body which experiences and expresses this accumulation. So that we are back at the position stated so clearly, eleven years before, in *Those Barren Leaves*. When, in his thirties, Anthony re-encounters Mary Amberley after an estrangement of more than ten years' duration, his predominant emotion is not pity but horror:

'Doing what one doesn't want', she repeated, as though to herself. 'Always doing what one doesn't want.' She released his hand, and, clasping her own behind her head, leaned back against the pillows in the attitude, the known and familiar attitude, that in the Hôtel des Saints-Pères had been so delicious in its graceful indolence, so wildly exciting because of that white round throat stretched back like a victim's, those proffered breasts, lifted and taut beneath the lace. But to-day the lace was soiled and torn, the breasts hung tired under their own weight, the victim throat was no more a smooth column of white flesh, but withered, wrinkled, hollow between starting tendons.

She opened her eyes, and, with a start, he recognized the look she gave him as the same, identically the same look, at once swooning and cynical, humorous and languidly abandoned, as had invited him, irresistibly then, in Paris fifteen years ago. It was the look of 1913 in the face of 1928—painfully out of its context. He stared at her for a second or two, appalled, then managed to break the silence.

It becomes clear that Anthony's conversion is merely negatively and passively motivated. He has not sought reality and truth, but evaded them, until at last reality has found him and chased him—the analogy is his own—from his bolt-hole:

Even in the deepest sensual burrow, Anthony reflected as he walked back to his rooms, even in the snuggest of intellectual other-

## The Novelist as Thinker

worlds, fate could find one out. And suddenly he perceived that, having spent all his life trying to react away from the standards of his father's universe, he had succeeded only in becoming precisely what his father was—a man in a burrow. With this small difference, that in his case the burrow happened to be intermittently adulterous instead of connubial all the time; and that the ideas were about societies and not words. For the moment, he was out of his burrow—had been chased out, as though by ferrets. But it would be easy and was already a temptation to return.

Anthony is in fact seeking some way of *escape* from the conditions of human life rather than some way of positively transforming those conditions. And the spirituality which he is indicated as making his own towards the end of the book does actually fortify him, though with a shift of emphasis, in that very detachment and impersonality from which the incident of the dog and his emotional crisis has momentarily jolted him.

'God may or may not exist', he writes in his diary, 'But there is the empirical fact that contemplation of the divinity—of goodness in its most unqualified form—is a method of realizing that goodness to some slight degree in one's life. . . .' His form of belief seems quite unashamedly chosen to conform to his own ingrained life-attitude:

God—a person or not a person? *Quien sabe?* Only revelation can decide such metaphysical questions. And revelation isn't playing the game—is equivalent to pulling three aces of trumps from up your sleeve.

Of more significance is the practical question. Which gives a man more power to realize goodness—belief in a personal or an impersonal God? Answer: it depends. Some minds work one way, some another.

Mine, as it happens, finds no need, indeed, finds it impossible to think of the world in terms of personality . . . .

And, appropriate to this central laxity, his new-found 'spirituality', so far from attending upon the wind that blows where it lists, resolves into the cataloguing of technicalities:

The fundamental problem is practical—to work out systems of psychological exercises for all types of men and women. Catholicism has many systems of mental prayer—Ignatian, Franciscan, Liguorian, Carmelite, and so on. Hinduism, Northern, Southern and Zen Buddhism also have a variety of practices. There is a great work to

be done here. Collecting and collating information from all these sources. Consulting books and, more important, people who have actually practised what is in the books, have had the experience of teaching novices. In time it might be possible to establish a complete and definite *Ars Contemplativa*. A series of techniques, adapted to every type of mind. Techniques for meditating on, communicating with and contemplating goodness. Ends in themselves and at the same time means for realizing some of that goodness in practice. . . .

What better comment could be made on this than that which Anthony himself commits to his diary at one candid stage of his reflections:

Reflect that we all have our Poonas, bolt-holes from unpleasant reality. The danger, as Miller is always insisting, 'of meditation becoming such a bolt-hole. Quietism can be mere self-indulgence. Charismata like masturbations. Masturbations, however, that are dignified, by the amateur mystics who practise them, with all the most sacred names of religion and philosophy. 'The contemplative life.' It can be made a kind of high-brow substitute for Marlene Dietrich: a subject for erotic musings in the twilight.

#### IV

'Man', wrote Søren Kierkegaard in a famous definition, 'is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self'; and, further, 'eternity is essential continuity.' 'Selfness or personality', according to Aldous Huxley in his last, mystical-didactic phase, is a 'stinking lump' . . . which has to be passionately repented of and completely died to before there can be any 'true knowing of God in purity of spirit.'

The mind-body carries with it the ineradicable smell of all that has been thought and done, desired and felt, throughout its racial and personal past. . . . The world is what (in our eyes) it is, because of all the consciously or unconsciously and physiologically remembered habits formed by our ancestors or by ourselves, either in our present life or in previous existences. These remembered bad habits cause us to believe that multiplicity is the sole reality and that the idea of 'I', 'me', 'mine', represents the ultimate truth. *Nirvana* consists in 'seeing into the abode of reality as it is', and not reality *quoad nos*, as it seems to us. Obviously, this cannot be achieved so long as there is an 'us', to which reality can be relative. Hence the need, stressed by every exponent of the Perennial Philosophy, for



## The Novelist as Thinker

mortification, for dying to self. And this must be a mortification not only of the appetites, the feelings and the will, but also of the reasoning powers, of consciousness itself and of that which makes our consciousness what it is—our personal memory and our inherited habit-energies. To achieve complete deliverance, conversion from sin is not enough; there must also be a conversion of the mind, a *paravritti*, as the Mahayanists call it, or revulsion in the very depths of consciousness. As the result of this revulsion, the habit-energies of accumulated memory are destroyed, and, along with them, the sense of being a separate ego. Reality is no longer perceived *quoad nos* (for the good reason that there is no longer a *nos* to perceive it), but as it is in itself.

Sin, for Huxley, is selfness. For Kierkegaard, as a Christian believer, sin is despair, and despair is precisely the dissociation, the dislocation of the self in its refusal to 'choose itself'—to put itself into inward motion and go forward to claim its unique destiny as a messenger of meaning to the world.

'When did the ego begin to stink?' asks a recent aesthetic sage, in a phrase which seems to have captured the public ear. Answer: *When it began to decompose.*

The later work of Aldous Huxley must be interpreted as a bitter diatribe against personality, which he sees as synonymous with selfness—selfness *when it begins to decompose.*

The word 'personality' is derived from the Latin, and its upper partials are in the highest degree respectable. For some odd philological reason, the Saxon equivalent of 'personality' is hardly ever used. Which is a pity. For if it were used—used as currently as 'belch' is used for 'eructation'—would people make such a reverential fuss about the thing connoted as certain English-speaking philosophers, moralists and theologians have recently done? For 'selfness', though it means precisely the same, carries none of the high-class overtones that go with 'personality'. On the contrary its primary meaning comes to us embedded, as it were, in discords, like the note of a cracked bell. For, as all exponents of the Perennial Philosophy have constantly insisted, man's obsessive consciousness of, and insistence on being a separate self is the final and most formidable obstacle to the unitive knowledge of God. To be a self is, for them, the original sin, and to die to self, in feeling, will and intellect, is the final and all-inclusive virtue. . . .

That this God-eclipsing and anti-spiritual selfness should have been given the same name as is applied to the God who is a Spirit,

is, to say the least of it, unfortunate. Like all such mistakes, it is probably, in some obscure and subconscious way, voluntary and purposeful. We love our selfness; we want to be justified in our love; therefore we christen it with the same name as is applied by theologians to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A man who has never gone forward to claim his self and achieve personality can obviously never comprehend the meaning of personality, just as he can never understand the nature of communion and love. For him, personality *is* selfness, that dissolute conglomeration of appetites, volitions, perceptions which are functions of the body he is given by nature. And when the natural ego begins to disintegrate and to 'stink' beyond endurance there is only one course left—to get rid of it.

Not only must the sufferer withdraw from his offending self—he must withdraw from the world, from other persons, and finally from God. Huxley's mysticism is therefore a-historical, anti-personal and atheistic. The whole cosmic order is, in its eyes, a pointless and inexplicable escapade of an inert and irresponsible deity, or non-deity—an escapade from which we are called to 'liberate' ourselves with all possible speed, in order to turn to 'the pure One, the absolute not-God in whom we must sink from nothingness to nothingness [and 'who] is called in Mahayana Buddhism the Clear Light of the Void'. (*The Perennial Philosophy*)

How is the novelist, the portrayer of human life and character, to work within this scheme? '... On the strictly human level, there was nothing that deserved to be taken seriously except the suffering men inflicted upon themselves by their crimes and follies ...' reflects Huxley's Mr Propter in the next novel, *After Many a Summer* (1939). 'No, a good satire was much more deeply truthful and, of course, much more profitable than a good tragedy. The trouble was that so few good satires existed; because so few satirists were prepared to carry their criticism of human values far enough.' A defect Huxley undertakes to remedy, for here criticism of human values is carried to the point of their complete abolition.

Huxley's basic dualism is here made unconditional. As a result we have on the one hand the group of puppet-characters—Jo Stoyte, the millionaire, whose palatial Californian residence is the scene of the novel, Dr Obispo, the ruthless, scientific-minded sensualist, Jeremy Pordage, the ineffectual flute-voiced litterateur

## The Novelist as Thinker

from Oxford, Virginia Maunciple, the innocent-depraved little chorus-girl—puppets whose thoughts and actions bespeak their utter worthlessness and futility—and on the other the more than human, withdrawn, contemplative-practical sage, Mr Propter, the essentially static mouthpiece of Huxley's teachings on the futility of life on the 'strictly human level' and the necessity for a withdrawal from human life to 'the level of eternity'. Between the two poles significant movement is quite precluded. Life is a dance of puppets, grimly, savagely pointless.

The anti-personal bias of the novel is pronounced; thus Mr Propter:

Bondage is the life of personality, and for bondage the personal self will fight with tireless resourcefulness and the most stubborn cunning. . . . The spirit is always willing; but the person, who is a mind as well as a body, is always unwilling—and the person, incidentally, is not weak but extremely strong.

This strange hatred of 'the stinking slough of our personality' is carried to the point of absurdity—

'Turn round, please.'

Mr Stoyte obeyed. The back, Dr Obispo reflected, was perceptibly less revolting than the front. Perhaps because it was less personal.

The dislocation of being is expressed by setting a neutral, arid and abstract 'mysticism' against a grossly material sensualism: life is separated into two mutually exclusive compartments. On the one hand—

'What is man?' he whispered to himself. . . . 'A nothingness surrounded by God, indigent and capable of God, filled with God if he so desires.' And what is this God of which men are capable?

Mr Propter answered with the definition given by John Tauler in the first paragraph of his *Following of Christ*. 'God is a being withdrawn from creatures, a free power, a pure working.' Man, then, is a nothingness surrounded by, and indigent of, a being withdrawn from creatures, a nothingness capable of free power, filled with a pure working if he so desires.

And on the other:

Through his dark glasses, Mr Stoyte looked up at her with an expression of possessiveness at once gluttonous and paternal. Vir-

ginia was his baby, not only figuratively and colloquially, but also in the literal sense of the word. His sentiments were simultaneously those of the purest father-love and the most violent eroticism. . . .

Delicious creature! The hand that had lain inert, hitherto, upon her knee, slowly contracted. Between the broad spatulate thumb and the strong fingers, what smoothness, what a sumptuous and substantial resilience!

'Jinny', he said. 'My Baby!' . . .

Mr Propter's peculiarly arid and abstract mysticism has its end in 'a non-personal experience of timeless peace. Accordingly, non-personality, timelessness and peace are what it means . . .' And it involves, centrally, a repudiation of, and an escape from, time:

' . . . potential evil is *in* time; potential good isn't. The longer you live, the more evil you automatically come into contact with. Nobody comes automatically into contact with good. Men don't find more good by merely existing longer. . . . The solution is very simple and profoundly unacceptable. Actual good is outside time. . . . Time is potential evil, and craving converts the potentiality into actual evil. Whereas a temporal act can never be more than potentially good, with a potentiality, what's more, that can't be actualized except out of time.'

Time as evil, once more, manifests in human life as age, physical decrepitude, death. Thus the thread of narrative depends primarily from Jo Stoyte's haunting fear of the grave, which causes him to employ Dr Obispo upon researches into the possibilities of artificial longevity. Wound with this principal thread is the intermittent commentary on the human characters provided by the baboons in their enclosure outside the Stoyte mansion:

To the right, on another shelf of rock, a formidable old male, leather-snouted, with the grey bobbed hair of a seventeenth-century Anglican divine, stood guard over his submissive female. . . . The coast was clear. The young male who had been looking for dandruff suddenly saw his opportunity. Chattering with excitement, he bounded down to the shelf on which, too frightened to follow her master, the little female was still squatting. Within ten seconds they had begun to copulate.

Virginia clapped her hands with pleasure. 'Aren't they cute!' she cried. 'Aren't they *human*!'

These threads wind together as the researches of Dr Obispo coincide with Jeremy Pordage's discovery, among the ancient

## The Novelist as Thinker

papers he is cataloguing for Jo Stoyte, that the eighteenth-century fifth earl of the all-but extinct line of Gonister has in his old age been similarly experimenting with a diet of raw carps' guts, and has mysteriously arranged for his own counterfeit funeral. On the insistence of the millionaire, in his terror of death, the fifth Earl is eventually located in his stinking underground cave:

Beyond the bars, the light of the lanterns had scooped out of the darkness a narrow world of forms and colours. On the edge of a low bed, at the centre of this world, a man was sitting, staring, as though fascinated, into the light. His legs, thickly covered with coarse reddish hair, were bare. The shirt, which was his only garment, was torn and filthy. Knotted diagonally across the powerful chest was a broad silk ribbon that had evidently once been blue. From a piece of string tied round his neck was suspended a little image of St. George and the Dragon in gold and enamel. He sat hunched up, his head thrust forward and at the same time sunk between his shoulders. With one of his huge and strangely clumsy hands he was scratching a sore place that showed red between the hairs of his left leg.

'A foetal ape that's had time to grow up', Dr Obispo managed at last to say. 'It's *too* good!' Laughter overtook him again. 'Just look at his face!' he gasped, and pointed through the bars. Above the matted hair that concealed the jaws and cheeks, blue eyes stared out of cavernous sockets. There were no eyebrows; but under the dirty, wrinkled skin of the forehead a great ridge of bone projected like a shelf. . . .

. . . 'But what's happened to them?'

'Just time', said Dr Obispo airily.

'Time?'

'I don't know how old the female is', Dr Obispo went on. 'But the Earl there—let me see, he was two hundred and one last January.'

The novel closes, bitinglly acidulous, with Jo Stoyte's mentally preparing himself to accept the identical regime undergone by the fifth Earl.

That Huxley, driven by self-hatred and disgust with life has reached a dead-end, is finally demonstrated by his last, most tasteless production, *Time Must Have a Stop* (1945). Here the puppets, fixed in their unbreakable abstracts of human qualities, and offset by the static and detached figure of a pharisaical 'saint', exist at a remove from reality which gives the novel an air of complete

falsity to human experience. The 'saved' Bruno Rontini, like Mr Propter a mere mouthpiece for Huxley's renunciatory gospel, is deprived of inward movement no less than the 'damned' puppet-characters immobilized in their habit of selfhood. In the previous novel, the only character not quite immune from 'the contagion of goodness' is the naïve and inarticulate Pete. It is no accident that for his hero this time Huxley should have chosen an adolescent (Sebastian Barnack is seventeen), that he should have involved him to his undoing for twenty-nine chapters in the depraved realm of 'the flesh' and then, by means of an abrupt hiatus, presented us, with the briefest of explanations, in the final chapter with a reformed and 'saintly' character, complete with copious extracts from those now all-too-familiar notebooks. For Huxley, as we have seen before, is for some reason at which one can only guess—we might label it 'arrested development'—at ease only with the immature. Incapable as he is of revealing the inner processes by which human beings come to inward maturity, even his supposedly adult characters remain adolescents upon whose juvenile responses has been superimposed arbitrarily the veneer of a quasi-adult sophistication and intellectuality.

Sensual depravity or an unreal 'spirituality'—down goes one scale heavily weighted with 'the flesh', and up goes the other with its insubstantial featherweight of spirit. The falsity to human experience of this naïve dislocation of being is paralleled in the novel both by the failure of its action to carry conviction and the air of unreality in which that action takes place. We cannot believe in the authenticity of Uncle Eustace's Italian villa, located in accordance with Huxley's now pronounced retreat from history, in a dream-like version of the nineteen-twenties, any more than we can accept the authenticity of Uncle Eustace himself or for that matter any of the book's characters. The vision, distorted for the satire of *After Many a Summer*, is here quite out of focus. The adult reader is utterly unable to make the required connection between Uncle Eustace's trivial sensualities—his cheerful over-indulgence in wine, women, and cigars—and the bathetic solemnities of his post-mortem experiences in the spirit world when, after an evening of luxury, he dies on the seat of the toilet. And the anti-climax of the disembodied Uncle Eustace's eventual choice of reincarnation out of the 'living uterine darkness', the 'vegetative heaven' of Mme Weyle, should serve, at least, in the mind

## The Novelist as Thinker

of no uncommonly penetrating reader, to put Huxley's 'mysticism' in its proper, very humble place.

With this final novel, we may safely conclude, Huxley's career as a significant novelist of the modern plight has come to an end. It is an end implicit, like so many, in its beginning. The novelist of futility, undergoing in mid-career a period in which the potentiality of meaning seemed for a time to offer itself—a potentiality accompanied by a realization of love and the value of human personality—has crossed over into a positive accentuation of futility accompanied by a positive doctrine of non-attachment and impersonality. No hope of development here! And, necessarily, this positive acceptance of the meaninglessness of human life, the worthlessness of personality, has its implications for art. When human life is seen as intrinsically meaningless and evil, then the work of the novelist, whose task is to present a picture of that life in terms of its significance and value, is deprived of all justification. Art and life must be thrown overboard together.

## THE INNOCENCE OF EVELYN WAUGH

D. S. SAVAGE

### I

POSSIBLY that traditional, melodramatic portrait of the clown performing his antics with a breaking heart, of the comedian who, keeping his delighted audiences in continuous roars of laughter, appears off the stage as a sad-faced man with a predisposition to suicide, is nearer to the reality than we are disposed seriously to believe. The line between amusement and agony is not always distinctly drawn. Evelyn Waugh, for example, has written two brilliantly funny novels, upon which in fact his reputation chiefly rests, *Decline and Fall* and *Vile Bodies*; he has also written, besides others not so funny, two distinctly melancholy ones, *A Handful of Dust* and *Brideshead Revisited*. I do not think we need, for this reason, consider this author as two distinct personalities; and

though to probe into the sources of humour must appear an unhappy occupation, I propose in this essay to equate Waugh's humour with his gravity and to consider his works in their organic relationship to that central human predicament of which variously they are expressions.

Waugh has been interpreted in social terms as a defender of class privilege and the Country House, and in religious terms as a satirist with a sense of sin, but though there may be something in these viewpoints, I think that centrally Waugh reveals the predicament of Immaturity. He is the brilliant undergraduate who has difficulty in growing up. As a comic writer he remains at a distance from experience which he views with a premature cynicism; as a serious novelist he endeavours to comprehend experience but is prevented by the mists of sentiment exhaled from a childish or adolescent Innocence which has never, really, been outgrown. Like so many sophisticates, Waugh is at bottom romantically idealist. His conservatism, which some have called neo-fascist, is merely a desire for the perpetuation of a social pattern known and loved in childhood or youth: his patent dislike for the workers and his obvious snobbery are symptoms of the narrowed human sympathy which results from a failure of growth.

First things first, however; and the first thing to be said about the humour of Waugh's first novel, *Decline and Fall* (1928), is that the convention which is its prerequisite is established by virtue of a deliberate detachment from reality. The world of human experience is held at such a distance as to preclude the possibility of its being taken seriously; at a distance at which persons become puppets and thereby appropriate objects of diversion. The second observation to be made is that it is a comedy of Innocence. Paul Pennyfeather is an earnest young man who is studying for the Church, and he becomes involved successively in situations of guilt which result in punishment which is unearned. He is sent down from Oxford and, later, imprisoned, for crimes with which he has only the most fortuitous connection; and when finally, having passively endured his riotous cycle of experiences, he is restored to primary Innocence by his counterfeited death, he returns to Scone College to resume his theological studies at the exact point where he left them.

The humour of detachment is that of Harry Graham's brutally



## The Novelist as Thinker

candid 'Ruthless Rhymes'. It is seen in Philbrick's account of himself to Paul:

'... After the war things were a bit slow, and then my old woman kicked the bucket. I didn't think I'd mind much, her having got so fat and all, nor I didn't not at first, but after a time, when the excitement of the funeral had died down and things were going on just the same as usual, I began to get restless. . . .'

It occurs, too, in the incidental references to little Lord Tangent who is shot in the foot at the Sports by a drunken schoolmaster—(' "First blood to me!" said Mr Prendergast gleefully.'—' "Tangent's foot has swollen up and turned black", said Beste-Chetwynde with relish',—and, in the next chapter, the casual aside: 'Everybody . . . was there except little Lord Tangent, whose foot was being amputated at a local nursing home.') The comedy of Innocence, on the other hand, is that of the uninitiated simpleton faced with the incomprehensible wickedness of the grown-up world:

'I had such a curious conversation just now,' Lord Circumference was saying to Paul, 'with your bandmaster over there. He asked me whether I should like to meet his sister-in-law, and when I said, "Yes, I should be delighted to", he said that it would cost a pound normally, but that he'd let me have special terms. What *can* he have meant, Mr Pennyfoot?'

—a comedy which occurs at its most memorable in the scathing account of the titled society lady interviewing prospective employees for her chain of South American brothels:

'... I say, Margot, there was one thing I couldn't understand. Why was it that the less experience those chorus-girls had, the more you seemed to want them? You offered much higher wages to the ones who said they'd never had a job before.'

'Did I, darling? I expect it was because I feel so absurdly happy.'

At the time this seemed quite a reasonable explanation, but, thinking the matter over, Paul had to admit to himself that there had been nothing noticeably light-hearted in Margot's conduct of her business.

Yet there are, in this first novel, some delightful touches which bear only a secondary relationship to these primary conditions: for example, Paul's first interview with Dr Fagan:

‘. . . I have a letter here from a young man who holds a diploma in forestry. He wants an extra ten pounds a year on the strength of it, but it is vision I need, Mr Pennyfeather, not diplomas. I understand, too, that you left your University rather suddenly. Now—why was that?’

This was the question that Paul had been dreading, and, true to his training, he had resolved upon honesty.

‘I was sent down, sir, for indecent behaviour.’

‘Indeed, indeed? Well, I shall not ask for details. I have been in the scholastic profession long enough to know that nobody enters it unless he has some very good reason which he is anxious to conceal. But, again to be practical, Mr Pennyfeather, I can hardly pay one hundred and twenty pounds to anyone who has been sent down for indecent behaviour. . . .’

There are, indeed, several places in this novel where the caricature approaches the actuality nearly enough to deserve the title of satire. Grimes and Philbrick, too, are genuine comic creations. And the prison scenes are, the comic convention once accepted, richly funny. On the whole, though it is certainly not in any sense an important work, *Decline and Fall* deserved its considerable popularity.

Waugh’s second novel, *Vile Bodies* (1930), has its moments, too: in particular, Adam’s gossip-column with its fictitious personages and events, Mr Isaacs and The Wonderfilm Company of Great Britain, and Miss Runcible’s exploits at the motor race. As a chronicle of the doings of the Bright Young Things of the late ’twenties, however, in themselves deliberately frivolous and absurd, its satire necessarily lacks resonance.

Two *jeux-d’esprit* of this sort would appear to be sufficient for a young writer of literary pretensions (Waugh had already published a study of Rossetti and a book of travel), and in fact these are the only truly and completely successful comic novels that Waugh has so far written. Ironic detachment from the futile whirligig of human affairs is hardly an adequate or promising attitude for a serious writer, even for a serious comic writer, for the richest humour is bred from fullness and not paucity of life. And in *Vile Bodies* there is a core of gravity hard enough to resist dissolution into the waves of fatuity by which it is surrounded. Its closeness to real experience, which somewhat blunts its farcical edge, is shown by the alteration in the temper of the central character.

## The Novelist as Thinker

Gone is the surprised innocence of the undergraduate, and in its place appears the blasé sophistication of 'that brilliant young novelist', Adam Symes, in quest of a large lump sum with which to expedite his marriage. The change in key is noticeable:

'We want dinner', said Adam, 'and a room for the night.'

'*Darling*, am I going to be seduced?'

'I'm afraid you are. Do you mind terribly?'

'Not ~~as~~ much as all that', said Nina, and added in Cockney, 'Charmed, I'm sure.'

It is close enough to real experience for the round of party-going ('... Masked parties, Savage parties, Victorian parties ... dull dances in London and comic dances in Scotland and disgusting dances in Paris—all that succession and repetition of massed humanity. ... Those vile bodies. ...') to pall upon, to nauseate Adam and to set him vaguely and vainly and most unfarcically yearning for some escape.

'Adam, darling, what's the matter?'

'I don't know. ... Nina, do you ever feel that things simply can't go on much longer?'

'What d'you mean by things—us or everything?'

'Everything.'

'No—I wish I did.'

'I dare say you're right ... what are you looking for?'

'Clothes.'

'Why?'

'Oh, Adam, what *do* you want ... you're too impossible this evening.'

'Don't let's talk any more, Nina, d'you mind?'

Later he said: 'I'd give anything in the world for something different.'

'Different from me or different from everything?'

'Different from everything ... only I've got nothing. ... What's the good of talking?'

'Oh, Adam, my dearest. ...'

'Yes?'

'Nothing.'

It couldn't, of course, go on, and Waugh knew it, and so made his book end, prophetically, with a declaration of war, and with Adam, the drunk Major, and Mrs Ape's forlorn 'angel', Chastity, marooned together in a broken-down car on the battlefield,

awaiting extinction as, ' . . . like a circling typhoon, the sounds of battle began to return'.

But the funniness couldn't go on, either—which was unfortunate. With *Black Mischief* (1932), the comic invention decidedly flags. It is not a particularly interesting novel—the location in 'Azazia' deprives it of social point—and here only its dominant temper need be noted: not innocence, nor even sophistication, but, almost, depravity. Basil Seal exemplifies a movement from mere callow playfulness to aggressive, conscienceless boulderism.

He stood in the doorway, a glass of whiskey in one hand, looking insolently round the room, his head back, chin forward, shoulders rounded, dark hair over his forehead, contemptuous grey eyes over grey pouches, a proud rather childish mouth, a scar on one cheek.

'My word he is a corker', remarked one of the girls.

Yet even the portrait of Basil, a slapdash Don Juan or, to sharpen the analogy with a reference to contemporary crime, a Neville George Heath, makes it plain that the detachment from life which had made the comic convention possible was in fact the detachment of inexperience and of the fear of life. For if the Innocent is one whose essential virginity is untouched by the escapades in which he is involved, the Bounder is one who is similarly immune from the contagion of experience, not indeed through passivity but through an excess of activity which adds up nevertheless to inertia, because he has removed himself from feeling in order to stand over and exploit an externalized world. Basil, we note, has a 'childish' mouth; and indeed he behaves with the inconsequent irresponsibility of an unruly boy:

At Port Said he sent lewd postcards to Sonia, disposed of his mother's bracelet at a fifth of its value to an Indian jeweller, made friends with a Welsh engineer in the bar of the Eastern Exchange, got drunk with him, fought him, to the embarrassment of the Egyptian policeman, and returned to the ship next morning a few minutes before the companion-way was raised, much refreshed by his racket.

Jumping the intervening *Scoop* (1936), a potboiling piece, and reserving the 'serious' *A Handful of Dust* for later consideration, we find Basil, with some other characters from these early novels, returning in Waugh's chauvinistic salutation to the so-called

## The Novelist as Thinker

'Churchillian Renaissance' of ten years later—*Put Out More Flags* (1942). His callous bounderism unimpaired, he reappears to lie, swindle, blackmail and fornicate his way through the 'phoney war' period, finally to acquire an accession of patriotic zeal and to rush to take an active part in the fighting. "Besides, you know," he explains in apology, "that racket was all very well in the winter, when there wasn't any real war. It won't do now. There's only one serious occupation for a chap now, that's killing Germans. I have an idea I shall rather enjoy it."

Ten years had certainly made an odd difference to Waugh's humour, as he took the old farcical characters out of their boxes, dusted them and set them incongruously on the stage to play a part in current history. They emerge, not as comic figures, but as rather dim, flat 'realistic' characters: continuing, perhaps, the movement towards real life noticed between the first two novels. Farce and realism mix unhappily, suggesting inescapably some fundamental uncertainty of the novelist's intention. There is Alastair Trumpington, for example, in *Black Mischief* decidedly a vile body, of whose conversion to patriotic good-citizenship his wife remarks:

'... he was a much odder character than anyone knew. You remember that man who used to dress as an Arab and then went into the air force as a private because he thought the British Government had let the Arabs down. . . . I believe Alastair felt like that. You see, he'd never done anything for the country . . . I believe he thought that perhaps if we hadn't had so much fun perhaps there wouldn't have been any war. . . . He went into the ranks as a kind of penance or whatever it's called that religious people are always supposed to do.'

I do not wish, however, to discuss the questionable politics or morals of this novel so much as to reveal the fundamental immaturity from which they derive. For in this novel evoked by the early impact of war the mask of knowing senescence slips—to reveal with disconcerting effect the undeveloped features of the retarded child. For instance, when Peter Pastmaster first appears in his uniform the effect upon Alastair is that described below (I give the passage fully because it reveals incidentally several related aspects of Waugh's world):

... this was the first time he had seen [Peter] in khaki and he

was jealous as a schoolboy. There was still a great deal of the school-boy about Alastair; he enjoyed winter sports and sailing and squash racquets and the chaff round the bar at Bratt's; he observed certain immature taboos of dress . . . he had a firm, personal sense of school-boy honour. . . . Since marriage he had been unfaithful to Sonia for a week every year, during Bratt's Club golf tournament at Le Touquet, usually with the wife of a fellow member. He did this without any scruple because he believed Bratt's week to be in some way excluded from the normal life of loyalties and obligations; a *Saturnalia* when the laws did not run. At all other times he was a devoted husband.

Alastair had never come nearer to military service than in being senior private in the Corps at Eton; during the General Strike he had driven about the poorer quarters of London in a closed van to break up seditious meetings and had clubbed several unoffending citizens. . . . But he had always held it as axiomatic that, should anything as preposterous and antiquated as a large-scale war occur, he would take a modest but vigorous part. . . . It came as a shock to him now, to find his country at war and himself in pyjamas, spending his normal Sunday noon with a jug of Black Velvet and some chance visitors. Peter's uniform added to his uneasiness. It was as though he had been taken in adultery at Christmas or found in mid-June on the steps of Bratt's in a soft hat.

He studied Peter, with the rapt attention of a small boy, taking in every detail of his uniform, the riding boots, Sam Browne belt, the enamelled stars of rank, and felt disappointed but, in some way relieved, that there was no sword; he could not have borne it if Peter had had a sword.

This remarkable reversion to small-boyhood recurs continually. Peter Pastmaster, the little monster of *Decline and Fall* who at the age of twelve (as Beste-Chetwynde) was mixing his own cocktails and arranging his mother's *affaires*, ceases to bore and begins to fascinate the girl he is, 'for dynastic reasons', courting, when the adult mask slips to reveal the innocent and frightened child: ' "You looked like a little boy at his private school," ' she says, ' "when his father has come to the sports in the wrong kind of hat. An adorable little boy." ' And, in keeping with this juvenility, the war, to these middle-aged Peter Pans, assumes the appearance of an Awfully Jolly Adventure—a page out of a boy's magazine:

. . . Then Alastair said, 'Sonia, would you think it bloody of me

## The Novelist as Thinker

if I volunteered for special service? . . . They're getting up special parties for raiding. They go across to France and creep up behind Germans and cut their throats in the dark.' He was excited, turning a page in his life, as, more than twenty years ago lying on his stomach before the fire, with a bound volume of *Chums*, he used to turn over to the next instalment of the serial.

Waugh's callousness, his smartness, his snobbery, neo-fascism, everything—all go back, it appears, incongruously, to that.

## II

There is really not much more to be said about Waugh. A consideration of his two 'serious' novels leads only to a substantiation of this discovery of his fundamental and inescapable immaturity. They represent Waugh's two attempts to come to grips with the adult world, and succeed in supplementing each other in their documentation of his impotence as a serious writer.

*A Handful of Dust* (1934) deals, appropriately, with the central adult experience—the marital relationship. And it is a story of unfaithfulness.

As a serious work, it simply does not come off, and the reason for this is self-evident: lack of depth. Waugh's primarily *comic* detachment leaves, when the comic attitude is abandoned, a structure of mind which is inadequate to the demands of tragedy. No one asks of a farcical novel that its characters should have depth, but that is precisely what must be required of a serious one. Before we can be convinced of the significance of a rupture in relationship we must believe in the meaningfulness of the relationship itself, and hence, first of all, in the personal reality of the participants. But it is just this depth of personal reality which Waugh lacks all imaginative and technical equipment for penetrating and projecting. Tony Last and his wife Brenda are two-dimensional figures merely. Brenda's infidelity and deceit are the casual, unmotivated actions of any 'comic' personage of the earlier novels. The burden of meaning lies with Tony. Yet Tony, whose life is shattered by his wife's perfidy, and who, in the grief of disenchantment, goes out finally to die in the Brazilian jungle, is distinguished only by his suffering passivity and wellbred observance of a code of gentlemanly decency. He is that inert figure, increasingly common in modern 'serious' popular fiction, who, for lack of positive content, is made quietly to suffer the

world's depravity and disgrace, and, exemplifying the concept of heroism at its last gasp, might aptly be designated 'the Hero in Despair'.

Even so, it is not Tony as a person who is destroyed by Brenda's defection—how could it be when as such he altogether lacks depth and definition?—so much as a picture of reality of which he is merely a part. For it is made quite clear that Tony exists only by the sanction of a romantic-conventional ideal which had come to him in the dreams of adolescence. His marriage was an illusion perpetuated by custom—'He had got into a habit', as Waugh writes, with what is clearly meant to be grim understatement, 'of loving and trusting Brenda'. And with her defection, again in Waugh's words, not merely Tony—least of all Tony—but 'A whole Gothic world had come to grief.'

With the wrecking of his illusions on the rocks of adult life, of adult, faithless sexuality, nothing remains for Tony but the destruction of his old self, either literally or through a cynical adaptation to the standards of actual 'adult' behaviour. (In his book of short stories Waugh prints an alternative ending to this novel, in which Tony is made to return at last to clandestine apartments and a chastened wife, evidently determined coolly to reverse the deceiver's rôle.) Adult experience—specifically, adult sexuality—is, to repeat, the insuperable obstacle for Waugh. He probes it with fear and distaste, finding at its very core unfaithfulness, meaningless depravity, a bitter handful of dust, and returns to the values implied in the obdurate, unhelpful a-sexual innocence of childhood and adolescence.

This movement of return is explicitly made, eleven years after the publication of *A Handful of Dust*, and after a meagre succession of inferior comic works, in *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (1945). As the sub-title indicates, the book is reminiscent in character. The narrator, defeated by life in early middle age, finds himself quartered with his battalion, in the early days of the war, at Brideshead Castle, the now tenantless country seat of the Marchmain family, with certain of whose members his past history has been intimately involved. Disturbed into nostalgic retrospection, he unfolds his memories, searching among the wreckage for a clue to the meaning of life. But all he can do is to refer everything hopelessly back to the 'enchantment' of late adolescence.



## The Novelist as Thinker

The basic immaturity of conception, which makes it impossible for Waugh to deal capably with his characters' adult lives, leads to a disproportion of the whole work which is ruinous of formal design, while the same immaturity flowers into a tawdry-poetical sentimentality which corrupts the writing and falsifies the already superficial characterization. Ryder, like Waugh himself, has remained inwardly undeveloped, plunging into adult existence with mind and heart impervious to understanding, to exchange a groundless romanticism only for bewildered, unhappy worldliness.

The book's formal disproportion reflects the juvenile bias, nearly two-thirds of its length being given to the idyll entitled 'Et In Arcadia Ego', which concerns Ryder's life at nineteen and his adolescent love for Sebastian who, even more than himself, is riveted to the nursery (as an undergraduate he still totes around his teddy bear). Their helplessness in the face of experience is the bond which links the two friends: the relationship comes to an end at the point where Ryder can no longer follow Sebastian in his total repudiation of adult life, a repudiation which takes the desperate form of incurable dipsomania; but Ryder's own character can be understood only when it is realized that Sebastian is his *alter ego*. When, after his disagreement with Lady Marchmain over her son's drinking habits, Ryder leaves the Brideshead 'Arcadia' and, by implication, the idyllic phase of young manhood (this occurs at the midpoint of the novel)—

. . . I felt that I was leaving part of myself behind, and that wherever I went afterwards I should feel the lack of it, and search for it hopelessly, as ghosts are said to do. . . . A door had shut, the low door in the wall I had sought and found in Oxford; open it now and I should find no enchanted garden.

The sentimentality which is inseparable from this vision of life infects the whole book, but is perhaps best seen in the portrait of Sebastian's sister, Julia, towards the end of the Arcadia section, where once more beauty and enchantment are seen as attributes of immaturity:

That night and the night after and the night after, wherever she went, always in her own little circle of intimates, she brought to all whose eyes were open to it, a moment of joy, such as strikes deep to the heart on the river's bank when the kingfisher suddenly flames across dappled water.

This was the creature, neither child nor woman, that drove me through the dusk that summer evening, untroubled by love, taken aback by the power of her own beauty, hesitating on the steps of life; one who had suddenly found herself armed, unawares; the heroine of a fairy story turning over in her hands the magic ring; she had only to stroke it with her finger-tips and whisper the charmed word, for the earth to open at her feet and belch forth her titanic servant, the fawning monster who would bring her whatever she asked, but bring it, perhaps, in unwelcome shape.

After all this, the final section, 'A Twitch Upon the Thread', with its perfunctory skimming of Ryder's twenty years of adult life, comes as simple anti-climax. Ten years or so are dismissed in a few pages—('never during that time . . . did I come alive as I had been during the time of my friendship with Sebastian. . . .') The central event of Ryder's adult life—his marriage, his wife's unfaithfulness and his resultant departure for South America (an accurate echo of the theme and conclusions of the earlier novel) is only parenthetically touched on, while the final part of the book is devoted to an abortive attempt to shore up the ruins of adult life through an *affaire* with Julia (Sebastian's ghost, of course), whose own marriage, similarly, has turned to dust in her fingers: who has herself failed, that is, like Sebastian and Ryder, to cope with adult existence. The reminiscent Ryder of the Prologue and Epilogue stands in the ruins of a life, with only a remembered idyll to flash a bright, useless virgin light upon the grey squalor of a wasted adulthood.

When, in *A Handful of Dust*, we are introduced to Tony Last, it is in the setting of his ancestral home, of which 'there was not a glazed brick or encaustic tile that was not dear to [his] heart.' Romantic attachment to the historical and mythical past is confused with attachment to his own childhood:

. . . Morgan le Fay had been his room since he left the night nursery. . . . He had taken nothing from the room since he had slept there, but every year added to its contents, so that it now formed a gallery representative of every phase of his adolescence—the framed picture of a dreadnought (a coloured supplement from *Chums*), all its guns spouting flame and smoke; a photographic group of his private school; a cabinet called 'the Museum', filled with the fruits of a dozen desultory hobbies, eggs, butterflies, fossils, coins. . . .

## The Novelist as Thinker

So that when, much later, Brenda's utter worthlessness is exposed beyond possibility of doubt:

. . . His mind had suddenly become clearer on many points that had puzzled him. A whole Gothic world had come to grief . . . there was now no armour glittering through the forest glades, no embroidered feet on the green sward;<sup>1</sup> the cream and dappled unicorns had fled . . .

It is this same adolescent romanticism which reappears, unchanged, in *Brideshead Revisited*; it is Waugh's only touchstone of significance for human existence still, and it is plain that as such it is still . . . . inadequate.

## THE NOVELS OF CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

G. H. BANTOCK

ONE is not so much surprised that the novels of Isherwood should have been praised—for they are obviously the product of a considerable talent—as that they should have been praised in such extravagant terms. Isherwood 'arrived' during the 'thirties and is still, if recent pronouncements are to be trusted, accepted more or less as a major figure. Mr John Lehmann has spoken of expecting 'a row of novels at once intensely English in spirit and European in sympathy' after *The Nowaks*;<sup>1</sup> the undercurrent of disquiet over *Prater Violet* bore tribute to the expectations that the earlier works had aroused; and Mr E. M. Forster has recently described him as 'extremely intelligent'. It is all this that makes a study of him of some importance, rather than the achievement of the novels themselves, interesting and amusing though they are. And so, bound up with the analysis of these novels must be sought an answer to the question; why should such a comparatively negligible figure—negligible that is to say, by any reasonably mature standards—have achieved the reputation he has? What characteristics have made Isherwood a representative—as indeed it must be admitted he was a representative—of a decade.

His largely autobiographical work, *Lions and Shadows* (*An*

<sup>1</sup> *Penguin New Writing*, No. 21, p. 139.

*Education in the Twenties*) affords something of an explanation of the particular quality of his novels and, as important, provides an insight into the nature of his appeal. An engagingly—almost naïvely—frank book, it reveals Isherwood's characteristic capacity for narrative. But more interesting is the information it affords about the peculiar fantasy life of its author and about his repeated inability to measure up to the life around him. The most striking feature revealed is perhaps the lack of what used to be known as character. This obviously rather charming, at bottom conventionally middle-class young man appears to have been easily influenced by his friends and to have accepted their fantasies as part of his own life; though, of course, to say that is to tell only half the story, for there must obviously have been a side to his nature that was ready to respond to their promptings. Part of the explanation of this he gives himself; he was afflicted, like so many of his generation, with the shame of not having taken part in the war of 1914–18, a war that was at once an adventure missed and a test unendured (especially perhaps, the latter, to one with Isherwood's nonconformist conscience). Hence the importance of what he calls the Test, the necessity, that is to say, of proving by some means his manhood, a sort of masochistic substitute for the trenches. It was an ordeal that he was always to avoid. Part of the trouble, too, can by inference be put down to the general chaos of values that made a refusal to accept the ordinary conventions of middle-class life attractive as part of a pretence of being 'honest' with oneself, demanding to do what one likes—the result of a general decay of those authoritative moral standards that in the past had made certain types of conduct appear right. These environmental influences combined with a financial competence (most important) and an obviously indulgent family, provide much of the explanation for Isherwood's curiously erratic progress during these years. But a closer study will reveal more.

As a retreat from the world of conventional values, that of the Poshocracy in Public School and University, Isherwood and his friend Chalmers erect a fantasy world—the other Town, Mortmere, the Watcher in Spanish, Rat's Hostel, etc. What is interesting about all these versions of a similar basic fantasy that intervened between the individual and his attempts to achieve maturity is the conspiratorial element, the hint of persecution mania, a hangover no doubt from the war but one which provided a very

## The Novelist as Thinker

effective excuse for not tackling the normal adolescent difficulties of growth by dramatizing them, throwing the onus of blame for failure on others (the entirely fictitious sinister intent of Cambridge, for instance) and thus enabling the individual to evade a sense of moral responsibility for his actions. This fictitious world, as Isherwood admits, became more real in certain ways than the real one. He comments on the surrealist element in these Mortmere fantasies, and it is worth noting that the surrealist movement itself was not only symptomatic of a state of disintegration but sprang in many cases from a subconscious desire to avoid the responsibility of making coherent sense of the external world. The emotional range of the usual surrealist picture is extremely limited; and the elements rarely fuse to form a whole, even if only a whole that is negative in implication. Something of the same characteristics of bad surrealist art mark these fantasies of Isherwood. They do not comment on the external world because their relationship to it is too slight; they merely provide a means of evasion. In his career, the shirking of the Tripos, his failure as a medical student, the continual, not unamiable but unmistakable, drift of his life are all stages in this career of evasion. He himself refers to his 'escapist temperament':

I could never see a train leave a platform for any destination without wishing myself on board.

His friends, characteristically, show similar features of failure or defect. Chalmers, his great friend, is 'tentative, diffident, semi-ironical. . . . Chalmers expressed himself habitually in fragments of gestures, abortive movements, half-spoken sentences; and if he did occasionally do something decisive . . . he would immediately have to cover it with a sarcasm or a little joke'—and Chalmers is typical of the rest. The history of the self-created misfit, with all his opportunities for self-pity and self-indulgence should be written, for it was a late romantic 'persona' that so many intellectual and even 'average' men erected for themselves in the 1919-39 period.<sup>1</sup> Isherwood, indeed, hardly qualifies as a

<sup>1</sup> It provided an excuse of all sorts of ineffectualness—illustrated by, e.g., popular music; note Constant Lambert's comparison of the bouncy rhythms of the pre-1914 vintage with the nostalgic whining of post-war dance music, when 'whimpering [had] indeed become recognized as one of the higher pleasures'. (*Music Ho!*) Mr Forster, it will be remembered, liked *Prufrack* because Eliot 'sang of people who were ineffectual and weak'.

misfit; he merely wishes to create an impression of himself as a rebel ('I wanted to stop playing the rebel myself') which little in his spiritual history serves to bear out. When the General Strike comes, he is neutral—hating both sides, chiefly because some sort of decision is forced upon him. In the end it is the Poshocrat element derived from his upper middle-class home and public-school background that wins, as indeed was to be expected, for there is no strength of character or mind to fight against it. He merely takes the line of least resistance.

I would not have spent so much time on what Isherwood quite frankly reveals himself (with, it must be admitted, some awareness of its relevance to his mental make-up) were I not convinced that the picture which emerges is important in the judging of his work. This obvious hesitation between a number of possible worlds, this failure to pass a self-imposed Test—which he regards as a necessary proof of manhood but which could be just as well defined as a desire for social integration and acceptance by the group—this continual evasion of responsibility, the particular nature of this refusal to grow up, is of great importance in any consideration of the moral quality of his novels, any understanding of the view-point from which they are written. The whole mental and moral atmosphere of the novels is in fact bound up with this revelation of just such a person as Isherwood depicts himself to be—the shy chameleon-like young man who half-heartedly reacts against the social atmosphere of his birth and upbringing without ever being able to take the decision to accept any other. His history, indeed, is that of any one of thousands of semi-educated, semi-articulate young public school men from whom he is distinguished merely by his greater capacity for self-expression, and among whom he found his chief audience. The most remarkable feature of this young man's rebellion lies, of course, in its painlessness; the worst trials of this spiritual progress are provided by dingy lodgings.

Accounts of the writing of his first two novels appear in *Lions and Shadows*, and it is obvious that both are again semi-autobiographical. *All the Conspirators* reveals the sort of world implicit in the autobiography. It would hardly be worth re-reading on its own merits; attention however must be drawn to it because of a remarkable introduction written by Mr Cyril Connolly, who

## The Novelist as Thinker

claims that the book is the key to Isherwood—and to the 'twenties.

*All the Conspirators* belongs to the 'Twenties through its austere and conscientious assumption of a co-operative and intelligent reader, through its imitations, not frequent, of Joyce and Forster, and its preoccupation with private lives and personal relationships.

Mr Connolly, springing from much the same world as Isherwood, reveals half unconsciously the appeal his books have.<sup>1</sup> *All the Conspirators* displays just those characteristics one might have assumed. With the return of Philip at its beginning the rest of the action becomes morally meaningless. It is supposed to be a study of weakness; but even as such, as a comment on the slow death of Philip, it is vitiated as a serious novel because the possibility never emerges of Philip standing for anything more than in fact he appears on the surface to be, a discontented young man with a vague desire to write and paint (a desire which, incidentally, excused in the eyes of a number of intellectuals during the last twenty years most crimes short of murder). Philip ends up in what Isherwood describes in *Lions and Shadows* as a 'decrecendo of anti-climax', by selling a few pictures at a bazaar and winning second prize in a poetry competition. This is supposed to be the final irony, the death of a soul, whereas in fact it is quite obvious that it is all Philip has been fit for from the beginning. It might have been difficult to recognize the irony of the ending had we not Isherwood's assurance that such was intended. The claim of irony is interesting, however. It probably marks Isherwood's desire to revenge himself upon his own weakness, as a protection against the realization that Philip's accomplishment in fact represents the sum total of what he himself had achieved—or hoped to achieve. However this may be, Philip as a minor Hamlet is a crashing bore.

Yet it is as a study of weakness that the book's appeal lay. 'I like *All the Conspirators* because it is a study of weakness, because Philip and Joan and Allen and Victor are English adolescence as I knew it', enthuses Mr Connolly. The critic is able to identify himself with the hero and luxuriate in a sense of wasted talents,

<sup>1</sup> In fairness to Mr Connolly, the account he gives of Isherwood in *Enemies of Promise* is cooler and more detached.

the responsibility for which lies, not in the hands of the adolescent himself, but in some feature of his environment—in this case, the family circle and especially 'the Evil Mother'. It is a little difficult to recognize Mrs Lindsay in this grandiose rôle; she appears in the novel merely as a silly little woman whom a son with any strength of character would have jettisoned, politely but firmly. By returning home Philip simply invites the disaster which overtakes him.

The only value the novel may be said to have lies in its narrative quality, evidence of Isherwood's supreme gift. Isherwood's talent, indeed, is for reportage; it is a journalistic one—the sort that lists things but has a considerable capacity for picking out the significant detail. Yet it is true to say that detail brings out no new element in the situation; the result is two-dimensional.

In *Lions and Shadows*, Isherwood speaks of his interest in the cinema; he reveals himself as a 'born film fan', losing all critical sense when gazing at the screen. Now the art of the cinema also is two-dimensional. The screen reveals surfaces; and so much Isherwood is aware of in his explanation of the fascination the cinema has for him. He is, he asserts 'endlessly interested in the outward appearances of people—their facial expressions, their gestures, their walk, their nervous tricks'. When you look at a film you see 'how actions look in relation to each other, how much space they occupy and how much time. Just as it is easier to remember a face if you imagine its two-dimensional reflection in a mirror; so, if you are a novelist and want to watch your scene taking place visibly before you it is simplest to project it on an imaginary screen'.

This explains very adequately Isherwood's technique. His talent is for narrative and journalistic description—one scene projected after another. It accounts for his inability to suggest development, to give the impression that people possess any more than a number of easily recognizable qualities; it gives the reason for the particular deadness and bareness of his descriptions. He cannot convey the inner meaning of a scene; the details he picks convey nothing beyond themselves, open up no new vistas, communicate no insight. It also possibly explains the peculiar a-moral quality of his writing, the lack of a sense of personal reaction, except in so far as the mere angle at which the camera is held can imply a comment. This work at its best, with the limitations



## The Novelist as Thinker

explicit in the above account, can be seen in the Berlin stories. And indeed, at the beginning of *A Berlin Diary*, he states:

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.

In these stories, his technique is shown more clearly. An example will serve. The incident of the boy and the hoop conveys the hysterical anger of the Berlin crowd after the closing of the Darmstadter und National:

A little boy was playing with a hoop amongst the crowd, the hoop ran against a woman's legs. She flew out at him at once: 'Du, sei bloss nicht so frech! cheeky little brat! What do you want here!' Another woman joined in, attacking the scared boy: 'Get out! You can't understand it, can you?' And another asked in furious sarcasm: 'Have you got your money in the bank too, perhaps?' The boy fled before their pent-up exploding rage.

The incident serves to focus the emotion of the crowd, though it does no more. It reveals nothing of the inner essence of its passion.

Isherwood had announced his intention of going to Berlin, at the end of *Lions and Shadows*. Ostensibly it was to receive the gospel according to Homer Lane. In actual fact, his departure marked another of the endless series of evasions. This time some success attended the venture; for he encountered a mental and moral atmosphere that particularly suited his amiable a-moral outlook. In the Berlin stories he appears under a shortened version of his own name. In them he moves through the scenes he depicts, emotionally anonymous, little moved to anger or comment of any sort, easily accepted as the perfect confidant. However much he may assert, in his introduction to *Good-bye to Berlin*, that he personally is not to be confused with this character it is obvious that, emotionally at least, his outlook is very similar.

It is clear that the Berlin of the early 'thirties answers to much in Isherwood's temperament. The chaos of values, the tension of opposing parties, the particular moral relaxation brought about among many of its habitués through the years of uncertainty and strain that had been the lot of post-war Germany, the very anonymity of life—the absence of future, the feeling of disillusionment which meant more a burden lifted than a load imposed, were

bound to appeal to the peculiar quality of weakness that Isherwood both consciously and subconsciously reveals. It could plausibly be argued that irresponsibility was imposed by conditions; though even in such a Berlin it is among the demi-monde that he feels most at home.

Mr Norris is Isherwood's version of Falstaff, to whom the author plays a more tolerant prince. One of Norris's attractions lies in the feeling of superiority, slight but pervasive, he engenders in Isherwood. The weak man has met a weaker. What is interesting about Mr Norris, and the other demi-mondaine characters who strew the pages of the Berlin stories, is the lack of moral taste that a relationship with them implies. I do not mean to break a butterfly upon a wheel; but in view of Isherwood's reputation comment of this sort is imposed. In any case, Isherwood's outlook was symptomatic of an important strand of feeling in the 'thirties.

Mr Norris and Sally Bowles, to take two of the characters, are undoubtedly, within their limitations, successful as characters. Both show Isherwood's creative capacity at its best—and both reveal the serious limitations of his art. For they are revealed to the reader in terms of external impression only and little tricks and mannerisms that disclose a limited amount of the personality but fail to convey any sense of depth. Mr Norris is set on the first page or so; the eyes 'innocently naughty', the nervousness, the flurried gestures, the timidity, the caution, the physical appearance (the chin that had slipped sideways, the wig, etc.), all build up the impression so far—and no further. Norris is only a mannered husk—as Isherwood implicitly admits, though he is clever enough to suggest that the very quality of externality that Mr Norris betrays is an essential part of his make-up. Bradshaw comments on the impossibility of frankness between the two men, when Norris has betrayed the Communists, and Bradshaw is trying to place the relationship on a deeper footing and gain an insight into the motives that actuate Norris's actions:

It was no good; we had returned to our verbal card-playing. The moment of frankness, which might have redeemed so much had been elegantly avoided.

Isherwood never gets beyond 'verbal card-playing' with any of his characters. It is interesting to note, for instance, that he never deals with love—except the more sordid, commercial type of

## The Novelist as Thinker

eroticism. He can never suggest relationship; the emotional complexity does not lie within his powers.<sup>1</sup>

A little earlier I said that Norris was Isherwood's version of Falstaff; by that I meant that Norris was one of those picaresque figures who runs through English literature, those indulgences to our lower natures that Mr Orwell has spoken of in his essay on *The Art of Donald McGill*. Yet how deflated a version of the Falstaff theme does Norris appear to be, how lacking is that emotional vitality that makes Falstaff bearable and representative. The physical shrinkage has been paralleled by a psychic one. Isherwood himself realizes the nature of Norris's appeal; it lies in his desire to erect Norris into 'a most amazing old crook', a criminal and therefore a rebel against society, while admitting that he does not really believe in his own creation. The revealing remark 'Nearly every member of my generation is a crime-snob' shows how strong for Isherwood as well as for others, is the desire to throw over the normal restraints of living, and points to Norris as Isherwood's imaginative reconstruction of the man who lies beyond the bonds of normal everyday living. But along with this sense of release that his relationship with Norris gives him goes a hint of superiority; for Norris he feels 'an affectionate protectiveness' which, as he admits, becomes a possessiveness: 'He was my discovery, my property'. Norris, in fact, makes no demands on him, he represents a further stage in the shirking of the Test. The only time when Norris reacts is when Sally Bowles reveals her distaste for his lack of ambition; his easy complacency is shaken because she shows up the mental laziness that lies behind his assumption of arty superiority. Even then it is his mismanagement of the scene that annoys him rather than an appreciation of the truth of her remarks.

Yet when all criticisms have been made on the deeper level, it has to be admitted that the Berlin stories—extracts of what was meant to be a larger book which characteristically Isherwood failed to finish—leave an impression on the mind of those hectic days when Nazis and Communists were struggling for power. This impression is the result of an accumulation of detail in which the absence of direct or implied comment aids rather than hinders.

<sup>1</sup> Passion, too, he avoids. Of the Communists he says: 'Their passion, their strength of purpose elated me. I stood outside it.' His adherence to the party appears to be little more than nominal, and the 'elation' temporary.

A considerable amount of the appeal of the stories is derived from reasons which lie outside the scope of the books as fiction—our interest is the mental and moral atmosphere of pre-Hitlerite Germany. As I have said, in dealing with Berlin Isherwood has sub-consciously caught the perfect subject for his particular talent; it is a world from which all sense of permanence, all pretence of value had vanished and which had itself become two-dimensional because depth and significance had been lost. To have conveyed this imaginatively would have required a novelist of the first rank because it would have needed to be set against the novelist's own sense of values; lacking the ability to do this, Isherwood has done the next best thing by allowing the scene to tell its own story through skilled selection of personality and setting and through the half unconscious understatement of the reporter, while relying on the reader's imaginative capacity to create the essence of the situation from the notes with which Isherwood supplies him.

*Prater Violet* confirms the implications of spiritual impoverishment contained in the above account. Its failure is bound up with the particular angle from which it is written. There are moments when it seems as if it is to be Isherwood's experiment in depth; though the attempt—if attempt it be—to invest Bergmann with a more than local significance, implied in the description,

The name, the voice, the features were inessential; I knew that face. It was the face of a political situation, an epoch. The face of Central Europe,

fails dismally. The old inability of Isherwood to suggest the inside of a personality makes him fail completely, and the character remains ludicrous, external, marionettish. This sort of thing occurs:

The face was the face of an emperor, but the eyes were the dark, mocking eyes of his slave—the slave who ironically obeyed, watched, humoured and judged the master who could never understand him,

and so on. One of the reasons for this failure lies in the changed attitude of the Isherwood of the novel towards his companion. In all the other novels, Bradshaw-Isherwood has been the observer; he has managed to define his acquaintances because despite his good nature he has maintained a certain detachment from them. They make no demands on him except that of a friendliness which

## The Novelist as Thinker

can be fulfilled by the social gesture. None of them arouse him emotionally, and so he can fulfil his function of reporter.

But his approach to Bergmann is rather different. Bergmann represents something positive. He not only stands for the political tragedy of Central Europe, the fate of the Austrian workers, the Man who Cares, but in a more personal way he fulfils Isherwood's conception of the ideal father. Hence the change of approach, a change which shows Isherwood's complete inability to represent anyone in whom he is in any way emotionally bound up. It is impossible to regard Bergmann as a serious figure, as anything in fact but a middle-aged, temperamental rather absurd mid-European Jew, an essentially trivial person, just as in the same manner, the whole world of the motion-picture setting is equally trivial.

Isherwood's hero-worship, however, leads him to one of his rare—for which we may be thankful—attempts to relate himself and his characters to the background of Life. After a brief but indulgently self-pitying picture of himself as an eternal wanderer on the face of the earth, an aside on the uniqueness of human personality and a few trite but reverential queries concerning the inner life of his companion ('How did it feel to be Friedrich Bergmann?') we are offered up a slab of Isherwoodian philosophy. Why do we go on living? The answer has to do with 'a complex of tensions'.

You did whatever was next on the list. A meal to be eaten. Chapter eleven to be written. The telephone rings. You go off somewhere in a taxi. There is one's job. There are amusements. There are people. There are books. There are things to be bought in shops. There is always something new. There has to be. Otherwise the balance would upset, the tension would break.

There is also apparently something called love which involves an endless series of death-like orgasms with anonymous young females; and then there is death and fear—especially fear, from which the only means of escape has to do with goat-tracks and glaciers—perhaps a reference to the particular brand of Yogi which Isherwood has adopted. But that lay in the future; for the moment, son had met father:

Beneath outer consciousness, two other beings, anonymous, impersonal, without labels, had met and recognised each other and clasped hands.

It could hardly be more banal. This presumably represents Isherwood's presentations of positive values in human terms; but the relationship is merely sentimental and the moral and spiritual value of the two characters negligible.<sup>1</sup>

To this, then, Isherwood's imperturbability based on weakness has brought him; yet it seems to me that it is this very weakness reflected in the excessive ease and readability of his work that has brought him his audience. There is much that is superficially attractive about his work; the absence of moral judgment could be a gain as well as a loss were it not that in a world that has lost all sense of standard and direction the lack of comment can too frequently disguise a moral bankruptcy. There are certain types of toleration that are dangerous because they represent an abdication of function, a sort of *trahison des clercs*. At their level Isherwood's novels serve to while away an idle hour; to pretend that they are the products of a really intelligent mind seems to me to partake of just such a betrayal.

## THE NOVELS OF L. H. MYERS

G. H. BANTOCK

IN the past people have been able to come together on the tacit assumption of certain fundamental values, inherent in the social order of the day, and overtly approved of in terms of morals and manners. Once, however, these conventions of conduct have lost their instinctive seriousness, the efforts of the intellectuals have been directed towards asserting the individual consciousness against the felt restrictions of society; and that has been followed, as in our own day after such a period of revolt, by various attempts at reintegration, both socially and cosmically. The nineteenth-century romantic, indeed, had replaced the morality based on social intercourse (from which, for instance, Jane Austen had drawn her strength) by the personal morality of the sensitive

<sup>1</sup> I see, however, that Catherine Carver in *Partisan Review* (Jan.-Feb. 1947, p. 96) speaks of all this as a 'moving coda' to the book.

## The Novelist as Thinker

individual who claimed for his intuitions and perceptions a validity which often brought him into conflict with the coarser standards of the bourgeois society of the time. That society was regarded as degenerate because such standards as still existed had been coarsened and vulgarized and had in the main lost what emotional validity they had possessed. Such an attitude on the part of the romantics begs a number of important questions; but it serves to define one of the important elements in their outlook.

This feeling that the conventional human relationships are in the main based on false premises, this revolt against the debased standard of a society that pays homage only to itself, and can conceive of no more ultimate value than its own spirit, represent important elements in the work of L. H. Myers which, together with his formulation of a more adequate conception of human intercourse, it will be the purpose of this essay to define. The romantic attitude which fostered such an outlook, and which has been referred to briefly in the last paragraph, is commonplace enough; it is the fact that the destructive element inherent in such a view is in Myers counterbalanced by a strongly positive urge, together with the seriousness of his purpose and the acuteness of his analysis of the existing situation—his mind tended to work through intellectual analysis rather than poetic symbolism, as is the case with Forster with whom Myers otherwise has a number of points in common—that makes his work so important.

In *The Near and the Far*, the first book of the trilogy, *The Root and the Flower*, Ranee Sita is pointing out to Gokal the extent to which she disagrees with her husband's outlook:

'I, for my part, shall always affirm what Amar denies. Between us there is a gulf.'

Gokal leaned forward earnestly. 'The gulf lies not between those who affirm and those who deny, but between those who affirm and those who ignore. Listen!' he went on. 'Fundamentally your mind and Amar's are similar in type; you both raise the same problems and the answers you give are the same in essence, if their substance is not the same. You advocate life's intensification, Amar its extinguishment; but you both recognize imperfection and you both aim at perfection!'

For Myers this distinction between those who affirm and those who ignore—The Fastidious and the Trivial—was fundamental. An examination of how this ignorance displayed itself, what

characteristics it revealed and on what terms it existed in society, will take us far in an understanding of Myers' work, and of the particular nature of his romanticism.

In all his books there is a small group of characters who stand over against what he calls 'the world'. By 'the world' he meant society as it manifested itself in institutional life, where standards of conduct were derived, ultimately, not from an apprehension of forces at work in the universe, spiritual by nature, comprehending something greater than man and something which existed outside him, but only from a glorification of its own spirit, a judgment in terms of its own materialistic values. This conception of the material nature of present-day society lies at the root of Myers' condemnation of contemporary life. In more metaphysical terms he expressed his dislike in his rejection of the cult of appearances: for appearances (illusion, Maya) to Myers usually referred to those assumptions of personality that a man adopts so that he may find himself accepted in the eyes of his companions as living up to a preconceived but fundamentally illusory standard of conduct—illusory because it is a standard that values only the arid conventions of the day, that represses the spontaneous self of the individual and prevents him from entering freely and spontaneously into relationship with other human beings.

This conception then of the material nature of present-day society lies at the root of Myers' social criticism, for Myers was not concerned with the differences between one type of social organization and another, though his positive conception of human relationships has important social repercussions that are hinted at in *The Pool of Vishnu*. Despite his adherence to communism in the last years of his life, it was a creed of which he obviously knew nothing from first-hand experience and one which served chiefly to provide him with an emotional stopgap—he was fundamentally against organizations as such; the problem that most exercised him was the possibility of a spiritualized, unfrustrated existence of human beings in relationship one with another in a social order that at present can, as he says in *The Orissers*,

see no excellence excepting in service to itself and which gradually but infallibly loses sight of all but material values. It consequently exacts terrible renunciations from its members—the deadliest and easiest being the suppression of a sense of renunciation.

Myers, of course, was in a sense concerned only with a restricted



## The Novelist as Thinker

section of society. He was himself a rich and leisured man, and it is of the wealthy that he wrote. The Indian books are taken up with the lives of Rajahs and Princes; the 'Clio' is the most expensive steam-yacht in the world; Paulina in *Strange Glory* is a millionairess. The books however gain their validity from the impeccable moral taste of the author, which shows itself not only in the judgment he passes on the morally obtuse but also in the delineation of those characters of greater spiritual refinement whom he employs for the purpose of exploring the various possibilities of a more truly discriminating order of existence and who, in their concern for moral order and refinement, bring into explicit contrast the triviality of the rest. In the condemnation of the emotionally parasitical and under-educated we are made to feel, not that these are members of a particular class and that the animus which is directed against them is sectarian or local, but that they represent more permanent impulses of meanness and triviality which are reproduced on all social levels; and by contrast, that the situation of those who are spiritually aware and fastidious in their taste is not that only of a small and elegant group but that it raises problems which are valid for all who are concerned with the dignity of man and the moral worth of human existence.

Myers was always strongly convinced of the reality of 'the Evil Will' as a positive element in human intercourse, a fact which accounts for his unwillingness to allow for compromise in the relationship between the Trivial and the Fastidious as for instance Forster was to permit in the marriage of a Schlegel and a Wilcox in *Howards End*. His mind was temperamentally less moderate than Forster's, a fact which enabled him to escape Forster's particular brand of sentimentality and whimsy though it may well have induced an unreality of another kind. In *The Orissers* the Maynes, with whom Walter Standish is closely associated, represent in their varying degrees of spiritual obtuseness the worldly and material values of the society in which Myers moved. To them the Orissers are fundamentally opposed; as Allen Allen expresses it: 'Between John Mayne and us there is no spiritual connection.' That is not to say that the Maynes are not formidable; Myers was well aware that such people could exact terrible penalties from those whose singleness of purpose was diverted by self-questioning, introspection, an awareness of other possible modes of existence and a respect for individual difference: the

continual quarrellings to which Madeline Mayne subjects Lilian Orisser provide a pertinent example. Myers made the mistake neither of under-estimating nor over-estimating the enemy. John Mayne is, however, defeated: and his defeat springs from the forced recognition of a moral obligation. His contact with Lilian Orisser convinces him of inadequacy; his handing over of Eamor is the tacit recognition of a standard beyond public opinion and common law, the sources from which the Maynes of this world are accustomed to draw their instinctive self-justification.

Nevertheless, the position of the Orissers is not really satisfactory—and the problem of the Orissers is ultimately Myers' own problem. They are self-isolated; and they are critical enough of their own position to realize that to be cut off from 'life' even in John Mayne's interpretation of the word is not completely advantageous. Eamor symbolizes an ordered way of life, uncontaminated by the material spirit of the society of the day; to gain it the Orissers are prepared to commit murder. Yet even when they are successful they feel themselves cut off in its 'dreadful peace'. The Orissers are the spiritually aware, but they feel themselves to be the self-conscious units of an effete and dying social order. They sense their own aridity. Nicholas represents a sort of schizophrenic division between an inner cultivation of the spirit and an outward scepticism about experience that kills all his enjoyment of 'life' in the sense that the Maynes understand the word. The fault of the sceptical spirit is that it destroys the experience before it has been undergone: hence the deficiencies in his relationship with Isobel and in his life generally, an unsatisfactoriness the roots of which neither he nor perhaps his creator at that time fully understood. Lilian Orisser leads an inner ordered existence that hovers on the verge of sterility and stagnation: Sir Charles commits suicide, the rebel Cosmo sinks into frustration and perversion under the influence of the critical and therefore 'Satanic' spirit. Only Allen Allen recognizes the claims of life through a cosmic and semi-mystical faith in humanity expressed in terms of the continuity and community of all human life. He sees what Nicholas only guesses at, the dualism that has arisen between the animal life of the race and the volition of the individual due to the introduction of the self-conscious critical spirit. Yet even Allen is not dependent on human relationships and his marriage with Lilian is not quite successful.

## The Novelist as Thinker

*The Orissers* then states a problem; it explores possibilities rather than states finalities. The concern for standards is not regarded as illusory; nevertheless Myers senses that the moral isolation of the Orissers is equivocal and that such isolation represents a desiccation. The element of retreat was strong in his nature—his love of scenes of tranquillity and peacefulness is one indication of this; it was however counterbalanced by a reaching out towards life in the manner in which he was able to conceive decent human existence, not in terms of rank or culture, but of moral worth and character. As an indication of the reaction of a particular type of fastidious taste—a taste with a strongly religious bias which in a more religious age would possibly have found its rest in the acceptance of a religious dogma, despite the strongly rebellious and independent element in its make-up—to the tensions of modern society—tensions intellectually conceived—*The Orissers* is valuable. As a novel it is by no means completely satisfactory. It exists very much in the mind; there is no clear or fresh apprehension of the external world. What is remarkable about it is its psychological insight and its ability to assess certain types of existence at their ultimate worth; but this ability is not skilfully crystallized, as a more experienced novelist would have succeeded in doing, into the individual tones of direct observation. One tends to be told about the people; one is not presented with graspable entities. What is fresh is the remarkable understanding of mental processes; what emerges as turgid and immature is the way in which this understanding is translated into words.

*The Clio* marks an advance in the technique of novel writing. The yacht is more clearly apprehended and the physical facts of luxury, more adequately conveyed. It adds nothing to *The Orissers*, however; it merely seems to say as much as possible for a somewhat more refined world of the Maynes, 'civilization in the slightly gross sense of the word'. It is in *The Root and The Flower* that the implications of the Orissers are taken up and explored in a more fully worked out social setting. The remoteness of that setting in time and place need put off no prospective reader. The novel is not in the ordinary sense of the words an historical novel. It was characteristic of Myers that he seemed to need a certain detachment for the proper conception of his theme and the manipulation of his characters. In his introduction he explains that his object has been to carry the reader away from the machinery of a life

that is familiar to him which otherwise might well arouse local passion and serve as a distraction from deeper truths than those associated with the purely temporary exigencies of policy. Myers' concern, however, is explicitly contemporary, and the problems which are raised are those that exercise the minds of all who care for the deeper manifestations of civilization today. In this work, society is seen on a much greater scale than in any of the other novels. The problems of empire, the sense of great worldly issues, the colour and glitter of dynastic policies provide a background suitably extensive, a setting adequately comprehensive to give profound significance to the spiritual and moral problems of his characters. The novel is told with great technical skill; the interaction of the external world of political action with the inner concerns of personality and being is conveyed with an excellent sense of balance and measure. The moral taste of the author emerges, less crudely than in *The Orissers*, in the manner in which the social criticism is validated by the careful exposition of the contrasts between the moral, religious and philosophical preoccupations of the more fastidious personalities and the trivialities of what on the surface appear to be the more important, because socially more significant, characters. Myers indeed tends to have the same effect on the reader—it is a great part of his strength—that Amar had on Hari in serving to define for him his dislike of Daniyal:

His sense of it in the past had remained floating in suspension; a drop of acid from Amar's particular fastidiousness had been needed to precipitate it.

Myers again is in no danger of under-estimating the power of the great world. Prince Jali, leaning over the balcony of the palace at Agra, felt his heart contract at the spectacle of the 'gigantic heartless splendours' that the Durbar had caused to be assembled. There are, however, varying stages of condemnation in Myers' view of this great world. His feeling towards Akbar is different, for instance, from that implied in his condemnation of Daniyal and the Pleasance of the Arts. Amar allows Akbar to be, in his own way, a great man, though at the same time, regarding him from his own viewpoint of 'social, cultural and intellectual superiority', he considers the Emperor a barbarian. 'His majesty is the plain man raised to a higher power', is Amar's verdict, for ultimately the

## The Novelist as Thinker

Emperor is himself representative of the materialistic spirit that is sweeping India, and his Din Ilahi, a strange mixture of creeds, is only a synthesis whose final object is to exploit the personality of its founder. Hence Akbar's greatness is one of worldliness not of the spirit, and the India he has created by his genius is symbolized by the city of Victory, Fatehpur-Sikri, which, after only ten years, is doomed to extinction.

There are, however, other grosser manifestations of the trivial materialist outlook in India. In Daniyal and his crew, frivolity takes on a positive intensity that gives emotional validity to Myers' condemnation of such triviality. His analysis of the Pleasance of the Arts—a private camp for bogus aesthetes set up by the Emperor's younger son—is a creation of the first order and a convincing index to the moral taste of its author.

Daniyal is 'the poet, the artist, the enraptured lover of beauty'. The camp glories in its independence of thought, its freedom from conventions, its emancipation from the Philistine and the prig. It casts off 'dreary actuality' and basks in the glitter of its own pretentiousness. Here everybody is somebody (the irony, one of Myers' few stylistic weapons, is obvious); 'in artificiality the spirit finds its true life'; revolt is the order of the day, revolt against the old outworn conventions, prejudices and 'above all, the bullying, nagging disposition of nature'. A closer acquaintanceship with the members of the Pleasance shows, however, the motive force behind this display of meretricious sophistication. The camp, indeed, has its own inverted orthodoxy. Not only is the apparent freedom of the camp entirely illusory, for all its inhabitants are bound by a rigid necessity to share the same vices and applaud the same apparently heterodoxical opinions; but they also depend

basically upon a solid, shockable world of decorum and common-sense. They had to believe that a great ox-like eye was fixed upon them in horror. Without this their lives lost their point.

It is the essential pettiness of this attitude that arouses Myers' condemnation. The gossip, the homosexuality, the mean conflict for minor favours, the inverted conventionality:

To each the voice of fashion was absolutely peremptory; what fashion enjoined, that they were eager to accept, repeat, believe and practise, without even a thought of dissent

are signs, not of Sin, which at least might have shown the inhabitants of the Pleasance to be men of character, but of small self-conscious immoralities. Spectacular villainies, vileness on a grand scale, might have been understandable; but Gunevati, when telling her love for Daniyal, can tell only of 'meanesses, trickeries and deceits, all of a most contemptible pettiness'. The smell that arises from the marsh on which the camp stands infects the moral as well as the physical atmosphere.

This might well be the place to make an aside on Myers' literary tastes, which, if mostly in a negative way, played an important part in his own mental outlook, and practice. In English modern writers he does not appear to have been particularly interested. Some, at least, of what are known as the Bloomsbury writers, he disliked: he distrusted most of the coterie movements of his day and refused to associate himself with them. He saw only too clearly how much of modern writing depended on a display of personality; a display which, because it has omitted to submit the raw material of egotistical revelations of self to the bar of the moral judgment, has resulted so frequently in a form of exhibitionism of varying degrees of pretentiousness. His criticism of Proust, contained in the introduction to *The Root and the Flower* shows much of his feeling on these matters:

When a novelist displays an attitude of aesthetical detachment from the ordinary ethical and philosophical preoccupations of humanity, something in us protests—we charge him with a kind of inverted cant, or of artistic snobbery. Proust, for instance, by treating all sorts of sensibility as equal in importance, and all manifestations of character as standing on the same plane of significance, adds nothing to his achievement, but only draws attention to himself as aiming at the exaltation of a rather petty form of aestheticism.

It may be admitted that Proust was a more important writer than Myers here suggests, but that need not blind us to the justice of the criticism as far as it goes; if nothing else, it is a sign of Myers' independence, and of his refusal to bow to herd judgments which can be just as potent among intellectuals as in other humbler walks of life. The exploitation of Personality as such did not interest him or only interested him in so far as it provided him with materials for a fastidious condemnation; it was only personality refined by moral sense, and capable of standing a test of

## The Novelist as Thinker

moral value when brought into contact with ultimate extra-human things, that could gain his approbation. Ostentation, show, the outer at the expense of the inner, were what particularly repelled him. Experience as such was of no significance; it must demonstrate not itself but something outside itself, to possess worth or value. Hence the slightly 'literary' flavour of his novels; he stands at one remove from the experience that has formed them. They are consciously shaped like Victorian novels; they seek not to convey 'the moment', but an event winnowed and sifted. Hence too the lack of purely technical interest in his novels, in the sense in which one finds interest in—say, Virginia Woolf, or Joyce; but hence their significance for readers whose interests are different, although I would not necessarily imply less important. His isolation has, indeed, provided him with much of his strength as a writer. His judgments are always individual, the products of a keen and sensitive mind, unperturbed by coterie values or clique-puffery—so that even where one does not agree, one can respect. That these judgments are not usually the fashionable ones of the day may account for the comparative neglect which has befallen his work; and part at least of the query about that neglect which inevitably springs to mind may find its answer in the account of the Pleasance of the Arts. 1,

Daniyal, however, plays a larger part in the book than as a means of castigating a particularly nauseating type of dilettantism, only too common in these days of what Myers termed 'deep-seated spiritual vulgarity'. As the novel proceeds we discover, with Amar, that Daniyal is not merely negligible; or rather that trivial-mindedness in itself is seen as something more far-reaching than at first we—and Amar—are aware. The whole point of the trivial minded is that they are 'incapable of emotional response to the universe in its august and divine aspect'. Hence trivial mindedness in Daniyal becomes something positively evil, partly because it is symbolic of so much in human existence—and so much that is socially important—and partly because of 'the offence offered to the creator, for the humiliation done to goodness itself'. The spirit of Daniyal manifests itself in strange and unsuspected places; even Smith the Humanist, though morally of course more reputable, is shown in essence to partake of the same attitude towards life. It is a feature of Myers' intellectual penetration that it is capable of demonstrating the essential similarity in ways of

life on the surface totally disparate; it is this perhaps more than anything else that gives coherence and a sense of moral order to his work as a whole, and raises him in stature above so many of his more widely appreciated contemporaries. —

The Fastidious—the Orissers group, as it were—reappear in the persons of Amar, Sita, Gokal, Hari and Jali, and again they explore the various possibilities of civilized and religious existence. It is a sign of Myers' maturity that he gives this group a much greater sense of self-assurance and poise. They accept a position in society which has dignity without preponderating influence; the frustrations one sensed in the Orissers have vanished—detachment enables the worldly to be coolly assessed without critical animus; Amar, as we have seen, for instance, admits the greatness at its level, of Akbar. Aloofness does not preclude generosity. Nor must this group be regarded as a selfish, spiritually proud aristocracy, who cut themselves off from the world of political action and live self-contained lives. They have their roots deeply embedded in the 'real' world of intrigue and political chicanerie (which, incidentally, makes the book eminently readable in the sense that that word is usually used by the Sunday reviewers); and in working out their own salvation in accordance with the differing spiritual urges of their natures they are perpetually aware, whether directly or by implication, of their responsibility towards the outside world. What in fact protects the book from the type of criticism that is so frequently urged against a philosophical novel is that the philosophical arguments emerge from a consideration of the possibilities of action that the situation offers and form a valid element in the motivation of the protagonists. This sense of social responsibility is crystallized where Amar, the character most tempted to turn his back on the world in his desire to achieve the religious consummation of his nature, is brought to realize the positive force of evil in the world that Daniyal represents, in the scene, trivial in manifestation, important in its implications, where Daniyal treads on the cat's head. When Amar strikes at Daniyal he at once acknowledges the claims that 'life' in the Western sense of the word makes on human beings and at the same time realizes the flaw, detected by Gokal and suspected by himself, in his decision to retire. The development is an important indication of the working of Myers' own mind. The isolation of the Orissers is disappearing; the problem has been



## The Novelist as Thinker

resolved in an acknowledgment of the claims of life without any essential sacrifice of moral ascendancy.

The implications of Amar's action (and of Paulina's decision in *Strange Glory* to go to Russia to join Matthew after the death of Wentworth and Stephen) are worked out in the sequel to *The Root and the Flower*, *The Pool of Vishnu*, which contains the clearest statement of Myers' positive principles in terms of personal relationships.

In *The Root and the Flower*, the characters had still remained detached from the mass of the Indians; practically no, what would nowadays be termed, proletarian characters are introduced, and the society of Imperial India, good and bad, is shown apart from the teeming millions below. Myers, of course, never truckled to the contemporary desire of the Marxist thirties for proletarian (often misleadingly called 'realist') literature—usually sentimentalized representations of working-class life by those who had had no first-hand experience of what they were writing about. He disliked the sordid and the squalid, and didn't mind admitting it; and though to a certain extent he suffered from the 'guilty conscience' that had afflicted the more sensitive section of the upper middle class, he was too strong-minded to allow it to affect the detachment of his novels, though it strongly influenced the underlying tenor of his work. He wrote of what he knew from first-hand experience; if that limits his appeal, it strengthens him within his limitations.

*The Pool of Vishnu* is a continuation of *The Root and the Flower*; spiritually it undoubtedly is. There have been many complaints that Myers left so many loose ends in *The Root and the Flower* which he had not been prepared to follow up in the later volume, but had merely allowed to drop. For a time, I agreed; but a recent re-reading of *The Pool of Vishnu* has convinced me that it is a legitimate working out of the implications of the earlier book, and therefore an adequate complement to it, if deficient as a sequel. Amar is dismissed a trifle perfunctorily; but the underlying drift of his instinctive decision at the end of *The Root and the Flower* is explicated in the story of Mohan and Damayanti, standing over against, as they do, the more stereotyped social outlook of Mohan's brother, Bhoj.

At the bottom of Myers' conception in this book, lies the idea of the Guru that 'every action is personal at its roots'. The word

to note is 'personal'. What Myers always fought against was the attitude of mind that clung to things, whatever those 'things' might be; position, power, money—and he was acutely conscious of the power of money—in preference to the acknowledgment of persons, of humanity. Or, to employ Buber's terminology, 'the world of it' in preference to 'the world of thou'. Buber's work—*I and Thou*—expressed, as is revealed in the preface to *The Pool of Vishnu*, much of Myers' own thought on these matters. The basis of Buber's idea lay in the fact that when 'thou' is spoken, the speaker enters into a *relation* with another person involving an adjustment of the whole personality, though perhaps even the word adjustment suggests something almost mechanical that is entirely foreign to Buber's purpose; in Buber's conception, as to a less degree in Myers', 'The primary word I-thou can be spoken only with the whole being'; the metaphysical implications expressed in the sentence 'All real living is meeting', lie behind Buber's idea; and 'relation is mutual'—love, in this terminology, is responsibility of an I for a thou.

In Myers' analysis, as we have seen, the world of 'it' lay in the vast machinery of impersonal relationships that a highly complex civilization—Indian in fact, but understood to be the modern world—used to divide men from men. He always had a sense of common humanity, of a common being that underlay all living things. Allen expresses this in *The Orissers*; in the ancient Egyptian gods of the museum of which he was curator

'other demiurges of the world stood present. . . . And I felt in my beating heart, and in my flowing blood, and in the people of the city outside, and in all the life of the earth, these same energies, august and restless.'

There was an instinctive, intuitive perception of the wholeness of human existence, the positive side of his search for 'a meaning that would link the courses of the farthest stars to the smallest movements of the human heart'. Hence the use of the primitive as a symbol—in *The Clio* and *Strange Glory*—and Wentworth's belief that 'I am convinced that in addition to contact through individual relationships, there is a contact through the earth', and his sense of Archetypal forms and patterns (the conception, of course, is Jungian). All this is closely bound up with Myers' views on the inner life: 'the external life *is* meaningless unless it

## The Novelist as Thinker

teaches you something'. In Myers' view then, personal relationships are a matter of inner adjustment in terms of mutual respect and a profound sense of common humanity. His idea of them depends, too, on his Rousseauesque belief that man is fundamentally good. He felt that by nature people were friends and that uncorrupted by the type of life that an old and fossilized society forced them to live, they would be so. There is a passage in *The Pool of Vishnu* that sets out his position in this matter clearly:

If one sees a man struggling at the bottom of a well, one is moved to do all one can to pull him out. If a man is starving, one's natural impulse is to share one's food with him. Surely it is only on second thoughts that people don't do these things? Society seems to me to be like an organized system of rather mean second thoughts. In theory no doubt, society helps men to help one another, but actually, it provides every man with arguments for helping himself and not helping others.

There is indeed in every man a *natural* fundamental aspiration to and apprehension of the Good; and all this is closely associated with Myers' idea that it is from what he terms 'the heart' that the fundamental truths of man come, and in the heart that they are best understood. In place of the negative, self-destructive scepticism of the intellect, he offered (though oddly intellectualized) the intuitions of the emotions, the language of the heart.

Before developing this brief and by no means complete outline of Myers' positive thought, I must digress for a moment to answer certain possible objections. To some, the summary given above of some of Myers' positive ideas may have an ominous ring. Expressed as they have been set out, certain of the key-words—'heart', 'intuition', etc.—may well arouse suspicions that what is being offered is a rather facile emotionalism, a sort of warm togetherness of a vague and woolly kind. Ideas on the natural goodness of man are not popular at the moment among intellectuals—and perhaps rightly so, for, corrupted by well-meaning but emotionally unfastidious people, they have been the excuse for a great deal of loose thinking and inadequate practice. Myers, however, is not to be found among the ranks of the woolly-minded. There is no hint for instance, of an Oxford Group 'sharing' about his conception of personal relationships, as we shall see. There are standards in emotional relationship as well as

in intellectual; his sense of the extraordinary power of society, of the vast incubus that lay on the human consciousness, would in itself prevent his regarding any solution to our problems in easy terms. What he offers is rejection, not irresponsibility; what he realizes is the necessity of a subjection to a new and different discipline, not the overthrowing of restraints in the vague hope that the resultant vacuum will be somehow superior. There is no hint of sentimentality in his conception of his 'good' characters—in itself a literary achievement of the first order, for it is notoriously more difficult, to conceive 'goodness' than evil. We know so much about the latter; the former can only be emotionally satisfying to mature minds, if the necessary elements of rigour and the clear-sighted realization of difficulties are introduced. What is important, in fact, about the idea that man is naturally good is not the idea in itself, which could well recommend itself to sentimentalists of every kind, but the manner in which the idea is worked out, and the type and standard of human existence it leads the holder to sanction. Perhaps the person who believes in the natural goodness of man gains on his more pessimistic fellow in the possession of an emotional certitude that is of great assistance in his grim and weary struggle to attain that perfection of being that he feels intuitively to be attainable; for like Sita and Amar, in Gokal's analysis, Myers recognized imperfection, and aimed at perfection.

There are then two important elements in Myers' conception of personal relationships, as conveyed in these stories; the need for absolute candour on a basis of complete equality and the necessity of following the spontaneous desires of the self.

As the Guru says when talking to Hari about Sita:

'It seems to me that half the trouble that arises between human beings is caused by lack of candour. Each imagines that he is the other's superior . . . he assumes responsibilities that he ought to share, he makes concealments, he will not ask of the other what he asks of himself, or apply to the other the same standards. A man who says to himself that the other wouldn't understand, or couldn't bear to face the truth, or could be made too angry by it, is really being protective not of the other but of himself.'

The perceptiveness of the exposition is suggested perhaps by the last sentence. It is possible that certain important elements

## The Novelist as Thinker

in the situation are omitted; but there is no facile emotionalism. The choice that faces Damayanti, between affection for her selfish father, who clings to her and seems to need her so much, and her love for Mohan, is presented in no easy terms. But the analysis is consistent. At the centre comes the Guru's injunction that 'personal matters come first. Or rather, in making one's personal life satisfactory, one automatically makes one's public life satisfactory too'. Damayanti learns that to give in to her father would be to treat him as an inferior, because her feeling towards him would be that towards a child and not that towards an adult—'You would not only be wanting in respect for your father, but acting on a wrong view of humanity altogether, if you were not to apply to him the same high standards that you apply to yourself'—and that she must only marry Mohan if she really wants to: 'You must never marry Mohan unless, all things taken into account, that is what you on your own responsibility, and for your own sake, want and choose to do'. The sense of the freedom of the individual to choose—and the necessity of having the self-reliance to enable him to do so—is another important strand in Myers' make-up. There are few deterministic ideas to be found in his treatment of human beings; the right to be treated as a person also implies the necessity of learning to act as a person—with a full sense of responsibility. Damayanti's relationship with Mohan is counterbalanced by her rejection of her father; there is no hint of 'let's all be friends together'. —

It is, too, her heart that tells Damayanti not to give up Mohan. By the 'heart', Myers meant the spontaneous, genuine desire of the mind, untrammelled by any of those 'rather mean second thoughts' that society imposed. It was the fundamental individual personality that Myers sought beneath all the veils of Maya—illusion. As we have seen, he felt so frequently that people created a social version of themselves, one that they derived from the temper of the society around them—and that all their lives were a lie because they crushed their spontaneous selves at the behest of a desire to keep up appearances or some such aim. The idea, of course, is in essence a perfectly common romantic conception; Myers can claim no originality for it. What matters again is the worth, the importance of the 'spontaneous' (never, of course, really spontaneous) feelings revealed after the conscious effort to probe to the depths of personality. These are displayed in the

*type* of relationship that Damayanti sought with Mohan—one based on a mutual respect and an inner honesty of feeling, dependent on instinct and moral taste rather than on reason and social duty. For, after all, as Guru says, 'Reason can do no more than disentangle one's instincts . . . I am suspicious of duty because it has come to be associated with obedience to rules of conduct which have a social rather than a spiritual sanction'. Again, then, we come back to the idea that right relationships depend upon spiritual sanctions. Once more, the Guru, who so frequently represents Myers' own conclusions about the nature of existence, expresses the connection:

'The personal alone is universal. The popular leader, the subtle statesman or lawyer—they speak only for the monster of the day and their words die. But the man who speaks out of his own personal depths, speaks for all men, is heard by all men, and his words do not die. His is the voice of the spirit, by virtue of which humanity is eternally one.'

The effort is not towards self-sacrifice—which is easy—but towards self-conquest, which is difficult.

On the social scale these ideas are given a wider significance in the account of Mohan's dealings with the peasants. For Myers, in his concern for personal relationships, believed that his idea was capable of a much wider application than the mutuality of two persons. *That* was to provide a basis for an extension to the world at large: any suggestion of retreat has gone completely. A man might withdraw for the purpose of a concentration of his powers and to 'achieve his soul's unity'; for it is only in loneliness that a man discovers what he has learnt. But . . .

'The knowledge gained in communion and ripened in solitude must pour its life into the world through action;'

and it is that action that Mohan takes in his care for the peasants and in the manner in which he divides his money with them. His meeting with them is a meeting in Buber's sense—there must be no suspicion of management: they must be treated as belonging to the 'world of Thou', and not to the 'world of It'. For the same laws of fundamental humanity bound up with the same conception of a divine meaning, are as true for ruler as for ruled. As the Guru again says, this time to Jali:

## The Novelist as Thinker

'You know that the spirit is the world's master. You know that you are not the slave of mechanical fate, but the master of divine destiny. You know that there is a divine meaning in the life of the world—in the life of men, of you and of me.'

And the Guru, who often serves as a mouthpiece of Myers' own ideas, employs his conception of personal relationships in his dealings with Akbar:

'If Akbar talks to me about the succession I shall be obliged to treat this great public question as a small, personal question, and that, indeed, it is.'

Even if one does not agree with Myers' diagnosis of 'great public questions', he draws attention to, even if he tends to overstress, a vital element in the situation. Myers is always at pains to point out that these ideas are the teaching of experience, not the sentimentalities of ignorance. In the story, these conceptions are worked out always in relation to the idea of effort. Nothing is simplified; despair frequently overtakes the young lovers not only in their purely personal relationship but also in their effort to set up a better state of society, a despair that springs not only from a keen appreciation of the inertia of that type of society of which Rajah Bhoj and Lakshmi are admittedly the finest representatives, but also, from a realization that the peasants themselves are as prone to the corruptions of the world as their social superiors.

The novel itself, purely as a novel, is not completely successful. Though the ideas are worked out in action in a manner which demonstrates how superior Myers was at that sort of thing to, say, Bernard Shaw (not to mention the fact that the ideas themselves are much more mature), the suspicion arises—it has been noted by a number of critics—that the events are sometimes manipulated to illustrate a thesis. The Guru is more of a chorus than a fully developed character; he tends to stand aside and comment on the actors. The incidents tend to be stated rather than conveyed; that inner tension that marks the works of the greatest writers is lacking. Detachment is seen to have its dangers—more clearly displayed here than elsewhere. It prevents Myers from entering more fully into the lives of his people; he manipulates them too much in accordance with the speculative trend of his thought and too little in line with common humanity.

I hope that some idea of the problems that exercised Myers and

of his quality as a writer has emerged in this brief introductory survey. As has been said, he is not technically interesting; his style is literary and lacks variety of stress and liveliness of presentation, though at the end of his life it achieves a delightful simplicity and limpidity and is a very adequate instrument for the conscious purpose of his writing. That purpose was the presentation not of experience as such but experience objectified, weighed and sifted. His greatest strength lies perhaps in his moral fastidiousness; to read his work is to undergo a training in moral taste that it is not easy to ignore. Writing at a time when all sense of social order has disintegrated he succeeds in re-creating on the basis of his own integrity a set of values in human intercourse, based on transcendental standards, that emerges as much in his acute intellectual penetration of existing social types as in the positive trend of his ideas. There is, too, an entire lack of preciosity. His work contains a rare combination of strength of character and delicacy of taste which in our muddled and unfastidious age is refreshing. The Indian books at least will stand comparison with anything written during the last thirty years.

## SARTRE AND SOCIETY

THOMAS GOOD

### I

THE enervating climate of *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, Sartre's trilogy of which the first two volumes are in question, is likely to prove treacherous both to the idealist and to the would-be realist. The reflective reader will hardly be satisfied, in view of the controversy momentarily centred round the diffusion of this new philosophy, to attack the narrative without some conception of the system of ideas which is its skeleton. Sooner than believe all the journalistic tittle-tattle which is in circulation about *la philosophie noir* (the favourite among the nicknames given to it



## The Novelist as Thinker

by its detractors) he would be well advised to acquaint himself with its main tenets as laid down by the philosopher himself. A vast literature on the subject has already accumulated and, irrespective of its ultimate importance, Existentialism threatens to outdo Surrealism both as a topic of conversation and as an inspiration for literary activity. Novel perhaps only in the form in which Sartre has given it expression and the emphasis with which it appears to invest the imminent frustration of the humanistic ideal, it arouses opposition in the main from Catholic and Marxist circles. From the Catholic, because for him man's ultimate happiness and destiny lies, not in the diagnosis and acceptance of futility, but in *moral* regeneration leading to the Beatific Vision; from the Marxist because, in his view, the prevailing despair and distress of man is the result of remediable social and economic defects.

The diagnosis of discontent is a feature of the literary history of the century. It is symptomatic of a transition from a traditional to a revolutionary view of life and society, and of a particular and recurrent phase of social history when the rival claims of individual freedom and society attain the highest degree of tension. This conflict is foreseen with unique clarity by Kierkegaard, whose solution is a flight into pure subjectivity and a heroic refusal to be merged into the 'world-historical'. As affecting the community at large it is reflected equally in the objective myth of Nazism, the flight from the horror of individual isolation into racial death under the guise of a bid for world domination. It can be seen in a less romantic light, in the recrudescence of raw nationalism under the emergency conditions of total war, in the blind resort to every conceivable fanaticism and outrageous superstition on the part of the unenlightened, in the psycho-analytical attempt to rehabilitate the diseased ego, in every shade of political illusion from pure Utopianism to a defence of the ideas set forth in *The Prince*. To all this, it is more than evident that Sartre is alive, not, need it be added, as is the snare of his kind, as a purely passive spectator revelling in the inductive capital he can extract from such a motley and invigorating theme, but as a highly sensitive, and himself no doubt partly bewildered participant. It is this almost terrifying literary conscience of his which places him apart from other French writers, in particular from those he almost ridicules for their aloofness from vital issues, the Flauberts,

the Gautiers, the Goncourts. Perhaps with his own courage and ruthlessness, he under-estimates their value and over-estimates their limitations, for the weakness of Sartre is a slightly perverse dogmatism, by which he is easily able to score off what he condemns or what stands in his way, a defence-mechanism for the inner scepticism out of which his existentialism was no doubt generated, and whose resolution he has not yet defined. Hence the note of alarm which surely accounts for his claiming, when his philosophy was being challenged in Paris, such a doubtful adherent as the late T. E. Lawrence, a bid which is on a par with, though less impressive than the Catholic bid for the soul of Rimbaud or Father Tyrell. As we know, this literary conscience has given birth to *la littérature engagée*, the case for a literature keyed to the moment, as the thought of an 'existentialist' is keyed to his very existence.

The result of this 'keying' in Sartre's philosophy is that amidst a welter of half truths, a good deal of sophistry and some illuminating observations, the human consciousness appears unhappily poised in an unending dilemma between the void and the flux. Not unnaturally, the deduction from such a spectacle is that life is an absurdity, absurd that is, when interpreted in the light of the more traditional modes of thought. It is the discrepancies which arise when one attempts to relate life as experienced to life as expressed in terms of abstract reason, which give plausibility to this conclusion. For life only appears absurd when judged by reference to some former evaluation. Just as we might expect an exaggeration of the element of misery in the world from a disillusioned eudaemonist, so we need not be surprised to hear a verdict of absurdity from a thinker, face to face with these discrepancies, who had originally accepted without criticism the idea of the supremacy of reason. There is, of course, no direct evidence of such a reaction having occurred in Sartre's case, but we might venture to maintain that his verdict of absurdity not only argues a novel and unorthodox departure from other verdicts but reflects, in addition, the *malaise* of the contemporary human condition. Sartre could protest in reply that the speculations of the professional philosopher should be judged by their validity within their own sphere and that a psychological explanation of them is unnecessary. But this rejoinder could be met by Erich Fromm's conclusion that 'we all tend to share the conventional belief that

## The Novelist as Thinker

thinking is an exclusively intellectual act and independent of the psychological structure of the personality'. In other words, 'ideas have an emotional matrix'. If this is accepted, it is not difficult to detect in Sartre's metaphysics, the impasse of the pronounced introvert. Nor is it without significance that towards the end of *L'Être et le Néant*, metaphysics merge into a revised but only scantily formulated theory of psycho-analysis. These questions will hardly admit of immediate clarification. They are alluded to here because they raise important issues which any final appraisal of the Existential school cannot ignore. As for *la littérature engagée*, here is a noble bid for endowing the writer with a new prestige and sense of vocation: at the same time the responsibility is on Sartre's own shoulders, for here he hands over to the critic the criteria in the light of which he can and will be judged.

## II

*L'Age de Raison* is the first novel of Sartre's trilogy. Its milieu consists of a small group of intelligent Bohemians in the Latin Quarter of the immediate pre-war period, whose main obsession is the idea of liberty. Precisely how they came individually under the spell of this shibboleth is not explicitly stated, except in the case of Mathieu Delarue, a young professor of philosophy, 'l'homme', as his circle define him, 'qui veut être libre'. Too intelligent indeed to confuse liberty with the vulgar and infantile desire merely to 'do as he likes' which characterized the head-strong figures of feminist romance of three or four decades ago, Mathieu's incessant aim appears as the need to convince himself that he is the sole progenitor of his own actions, an aim in the light of which, he executes an exhaustive self-examination. This principle of an absolute liberty he applies in order to reinforce his self-esteem, not only to such actions as would, on a rational interpretation, appear appropriate to his immediate or ultimate interest, but to such an irresponsible gesture as the deliberate breaking of a vase, three thousand years old, the property of an uncle, which appeared to him justified by the release it accorded. 'Il avait pensé: "C'est moi qui a fait ça"! et il s'était senti tout fier, libéré du monde et sans attaches, sans famille, sans origines, un petit surgissement têtu qui avait crevé la croute terrestre.' He was seven then, and at sixteen, seized on the seashore of Arcachon by one of those inexplicable moments of ecstatic insight (recalling

Stephen Daedalus on the beach of Howth) he vows that the pattern of his life must shape itself in accordance with this 'exceptional moment'. 'Etre libre. Etre cause de soi, pouvoir dire: je suis parce que je le veux; être mon propre commencement.' The self-conscious dedication to such a formula for existence can easily be seen to involve certain pitfalls which only mature experience could be expected to rectify or at least modify, but no doubt it invested Mathieu's existence intellectually with a certain symbolic value both in his own eyes and those of his associates, especially of his adoring pupil in philosophy, Boris. Although the principle is in fact described as liberty, an equivocal enough term, Mathieu's real preoccupation is with the question of free-will. Little as we really know of the sources of human motivation, it seems unlikely that a guiding principle such as that of liberty can act *in vacuo*; if such a course were possible the result would be a kind of senseless automatism, the defeat of its own ends. The ideal, in Mathieu's case, however noble in its conception, as a gesture particularly symptomatic of the feelings and claims of his generation, proves, when challenged by the human situation, to be only an impressive cover for velleity and evasiveness. The challenge presents itself when his young mistress, Marcelle, discovers she is pregnant by him. Out of anguish is born liberty, is a dictum of the school. In the mutual confidences evoked by the emergency, Mathieu and Marcelle see their relations in a new perspective. The balance of Mathieu's hysterical ambivalence inclines towards ruthlessness, disgust and even the desire to retreat by volunteering for service in the Spanish Civil War as a member of the International Brigade. A kind of equivocation in the feelings of the lovers arises, accentuated in Mathieu's case by his infatuation for a young student Ivich. Preoccupied now by practical issues, whether or not he dare entrust Marcelle to an abortionist, whether he may or may not be able to borrow the necessary money, he now sees his liberty in crisis. The intellectual hedonism which at least had permitted him to enjoy his cherished principle as a notion, or experience it as a mirage, is eclipsed by the intrusion of the Nemesis of guilt and remorse. In virtue of the exercise of his liberty (in so far as his intimacy with Marcelle can be interpreted as an act of liberty) he is expelled from a metaphysical paradise into the field of ethical relations. Here the psychological situation is parallel to that of *Huis Clos*, with the difference that

## The Novelist as Thinker

in the play the characters are enclosed within an impasse, whilst in the novel they are faced with the necessity of immediate action.

So Mathieu's first obligation is to track down the most accessible abortionist, and in order to satisfy himself, to investigate the conditions of her trade, which turn out, as he had suspected, to be appalling. He cannot allow Marcelle to risk her life at the hands of the repulsive and unqualified hag whose services his mistress has suggested without any further recommendation than that one of her friends had availed herself of them. The young homosexual Daniel seems to be his sole resource to raise the amount necessary for the services of a more scrupulous practitioner. But Daniel is non-committal and even pretends that he has not 4,000 francs at his disposal. As the issue is protracted by one delay after another, the young professor becomes the prey of revulsion. He is intimidated by the horror of destroying a human embryo. He begins to speculate whether the opportunity of marrying Marcelle would not constitute an occasion of exercising an act of liberty, a proposal voiced in the first instance by Daniel. For what, he hazards facetiously, could be more fun than to do the contrary of what one wishes. Astute, and at odds with himself on account of his inversion, Daniel seizes on Mathieu's misfortune as a convenient occasion upon which to project his sadistic urges and maladjustment, for he too, partakes of the allotropic sensitiveness which gnaws at the vitality of the whole circle. More formidable is the typical bourgeois reaction of his brother, Jacques, to whom he next confides his predicament. He takes, as a solicitor, the professional line of attack. He demonstrates conclusively that Mathieu is virtually married to Marcelle, that the sensible solution is to legalize the relationship, that the proposed abortion is equivalent to metaphysical murder. Without the least priggishness or presumption, he makes a well-intentioned attempt to convince his brother of the futility of his life in a phoney Bohemia and ends by offering him 10,000 francs if he will regularize the liaison. When the issue of marriage is raised, Mathieu shifts the burden of responsibility on Marcelle and contends that it is she who insists on 'freedom'.

In the intervals between his attempts to borrow the money and his philosophical ruminations in streets and cafés, Mathieu pursues his infatuation for Ivich. This diversion allows him the opportunity his nature demands to temporize. Ivich knows

nothing of the mental crisis he is enduring; she herself is waiting unhopefully for the results of the *licence*, staving off the suspense by a round of drinking and dancing in which Mathieu partners her whenever he is free. Since her whole future hinges on her success in the examination—failure involves returning to the provinces under the parental roof, and so good-bye liberty for her—she is hardly in a condition to receive his attentions enthusiastically. And Mathieu is so much in two minds—‘Je ne sais pas ce que je veux d’elle’—that his advances are at first diffident and unconvincing. If his feelings are augmented during the taxi-ride to the Gauguin exhibition, he feels impelled to her not by any overpowering urge but by a mixture of tenderness and a sense of morose fatalism. Her answer to his attempts to sound her reaction, difficult enough in view of her casual behaviour, is a more direct retort than he possibly expected: ‘Avec vous on se sent en sécurité, on n’a jamais à craindre d’imprévu’. As with Marcelle, he is perpetually restive for his partner to reinforce his self-confidence, to put him at ease with himself. She objects to his ordered weekly programme condensed from the *Semaine à Paris*, she protests that looking at pictures is not for her an activity which is particularly efficacious. She likes it as she likes the ‘dancings’ and this confession for her friend is just so much love’s labour lost. And when after the visit, she decides to go home at once, his thoughts turn again to Marcelle. Meanwhile Marcelle is at home enveloped in that nauseous fantasy state which Sartre so diabolically depicts. When she envisages her lover it is to see again ‘ses orteils avec un dégoût morose’, to spare herself those revulsions to physical love which are the bane of the over-refined. And whilst she clings desperately to the notion of Mathieu whose independence makes her writhe and whom she suspects of complacency, she has to confess that it is to the ‘archangel’, Daniel, that she inclines because of his greater insight, and the mental sympathy which she derives from his visits and which threatens to overshadow her declining love for her sexual partner. ‘Il avait entre eux quelque chose de plus fort que l’amour’.

And then, without the least warning, Daniel, by a magnificent sleight, which at first we do not know whether to take seriously or not, suggests to Mathieu that he, Daniel, is responsible for Marcelle’s conception. In the context of this disclosure, it becomes easier to gauge the extent of Mathieu’s affection for the girl. What

## The Novelist as Thinker

disturbs him primarily is not a sense of defeat, Daniel having deceived him, but the threat to his own possessiveness and the necessity of being obliged again to revise his attitude to Marcelle. He remains incredulous and reassured, and this is made possible by Marcelle's reluctance to be a party to the dissimulation. His dominant feeling that he must, in order to make good, marry Marcelle is now reinforced, but this does not prevent him from making the most violent asseverations of love to Ivich. All that concerns Ivich now however is that she has failed in her *licence*, and all Mathieu's endearments and promises of financial support evoke no enthusiasm from her in her half-drunk condition. Only when a friend intrudes to announce that a new abortionist will not give credit, news which he divulges at once to Ivich, does she understand the real situation. And that revelation, as Mathieu, if he had the faintest intimation of the feminine mind, might have anticipated, exposes him naturally to her most merciless ridicule. If he cannot foot the bill for Marcelle's operation, how can he offer to support her (Ivich)?

Interspersed with a good deal of existential comment, the whole drama of *L'Age de Raison* hinges on the reactions of this young professor, who lacks the initiative to learn English, join the Communist party or volunteer for the Spanish Civil War. Everywhere he is confronted by a native ambivalence, which is only exacerbated by his efforts to assess his reactions to the satisfaction of his self-esteem. Never for a moment certain whether this crisis in his life has won or deprived him of freedom, he makes desperate attempts to convince himself that the anxiety he cannot suppress is on Marcelle's behalf, that he himself is 'un gaillard et un criminel'. Hustled a little by the author, he is ever ready to see himself in the void, advancing 'vers rien', obstinately prone to capitulate by confessing 'il n'y a pas de l'avenir'. Yet his hysteria and panic have a certain justification, for how else could a sensitive intellectual preoccupied with philosophical casuistry to the extent that he cannot leave off performing perpetual acts of laceration upon himself, be affected by the buffets of the world of fact?

Since the abortionist is due to quit Paris, Mathieu has now only a few hours to raise the money. He learns from Boris, to whom he confides his trouble, that Lola, his mistress, has the exact sum. Boris tries to persuade her to pass the money over to him on the pretext that she had promised to loan it to a young man who was

opening up a garage. But she has changed her mind. Mathieu decides (actually for once he is able to make a clear decision) to steal the money. He effects the theft, salves his conscience with more casuistry, and eventually confesses to both Marcelle and Ivich: 'c'est un emprunt forcé'. Meanwhile Daniel has decided to lend him the 4,000 francs. Very cunningly, and with an inevitability in the description of which Sartre's artistry is at its happiest, Marcelle extracts from Mathieu the admission that he no longer loves her. And now Daniel makes sadistic capital out of the situation, by drawing out his friend's exposure of his miserable insufficiency and announcing the fact that he is going to marry Marcelle.

### III

The theme of *L'Age de Raison* is the effort of the characters to establish personal relationships, an effort which constantly cuts across their individual aims and ambition. So far there is nothing especially novel in the conflicts which are delineated in the narrative. But in *L'Etre et le Néant* Sartre, is at great pains to demonstrate that love, as the union of two beings is an impossible ideal. The identification which is the lover's aspiration is unrealizable because its achievement would involve the annihilation of the very self as 'other' with which identification is desired. Hence sexual intercourse is merely an organic possibility, vitiated by desire. 'Si l'Amour', he contends,<sup>1</sup> 'en effet, était pur desir de possession pssique, il pourrait être, en bien de cas, facilement satisfait. Le héros de Proust, par exemple, qui installe chez lui sa maîtresse, peut la voir et la posséder à toute heure du jour et a su la mettre dans une totale dépendance matérielle, devrait être tiré d'inquiétude. On sait pourtant qu'il est, au contraire, rongé de souci. C'est par sa conscience qu'Albertine échappe à Marcel, lors même qu'il est à côté d'elle et c'est pourquoi il ne connaît de répit que s'il la contemple pendant son sommeil. Il est donc certain que l'amour veut captiver la 'conscience'. It is most significant that the quotation is from an author who by temperament and abnormality was incapable himself of a normal relationship. Doubtless Sartre would endorse that writer's remark that 'a bird in the bush is worth two in the hand'. When we acknowledge that some of the ablest geniuses of the world have been sexually or otherwise erotically defective, we shall not be disposed to allow any final

<sup>1</sup> *L'Etre et le Néant*, p. 434.



## The Novelist as Thinker

validity to such generalizations, however plausibly expressed. Nor need the problems of love and sex, posed in abstraction, exercise any compelling urgency unless we accept the philosopher's premises. The crux of the matter would seem that the ideal of love, modified to meet the exigencies of each age, and varying even with climate and race, persists defiantly in one shape or another. For an Anglo-Saxon, the erotic issues raised by Sartre are likely to appear irrelevant enough, since his emotional life follows an admittedly different pattern. It is more than possible that the problems peculiar to Sartre's figures, and which appear so urgent in his treatise are the outcome of the over-stimulation of desire in a country where a man's reputation depends very largely on the number of women he has succeeded in seducing, and may therefore be relegated to the department of local morale. In defining the contemporary attitude to love, both Hollywood and the Freudian analysis have thrown a disproportionate emphasis on a human activity, whose exercise depends first and foremost on the integrity of the individual, and on the amount of good will he is prepared to expend. It is characteristic of Sartre to educe his illustrations from the lowest human denominator. Much nearer to the mark is the explanation of Aldous Huxley, that the fundamental error which causes most of the misery and disillusion in the conduct of love and life, is that both saint and sinner demand too much. With Sartre's characters, the complexity of their situation derives in no small measure from their immaturity. On all other scores they invite little but impatience. Like his immediate antecedents in the field of fiction, Proust and Gide, Sartre is a formidable denizen of the Bad-Lands, those morasses of literary despair which indicate the disguised romantic. Despite a few minor innovations, it is the same fallow ground we traverse, of the monomania of the moment, decorated on this occasion with the overtly disagreeable scaffolding of the existential scheme.

Whatever challenge is implied in this interpretation of Sartre's approach does not rest on any adhesion to the idea of a Moral Law, or upon Puritan prejudice. It proceeds from the conviction that any amelioration of the human condition (and this is in the direct pathway of this writer's avowed aims) depends finally on the uncompromising maintenance of the dignity of man. In the face of degeneration and moral bankruptcy, it is easy enough to expatiate on the engaging futility of a pack of rebels whose

diseased sensibility, in rejecting and not unreasonably, one order, lacks the vision to attempt to secure another. For the crying tragedy of our age is not that such formative resources are lacking: on the contrary, there is ample, thanks to scientific and psychological discovery, as Ortega Y Gasset affirms, 'to exceed the receptive powers of the normal man'. This is not to ask of an author that he shall paint in unmistakable colours the victory of 'good' over 'evil', in accordance with the standards of the Decalogue. What we can affirm as the result of so heavy a dose of barbarism is that it is high time some novelist with a sense of proportion introduced the contemporary scene in terms of *contrast*. For even in this age, there are individuals with an energy which derives from ideals, who act on principles even though those principles may be less easily definable than those of their Victorian forbears or pious contemporaries. If Sartre has not encountered such persons, or if his sole aim is to debunk them, then the loss is his. The result is an impoverishment in his presentation which is as irritating as it is irreparable. The obverse is the classical method, which demands a comprehensiveness and dexterity which cannot be claimed for Sartre.

It could be quite justly contested, of course, that these strictures are premature, that since only two volumes of the trilogy have appeared, we have no idea what Sartre has up his sleeve. All we can deduce at the moment is that his ideology reflects a callous though covert hostility to the values of European culture. It appears that Sartre for us, in England, anticipates a condition which on a less disillusioned view—refusing to accept human perversity as universal—has not yet reached its peak. We can understand that the unrest and exhaustion of the continent may have contributed their share in the building-up of so ruthless a spectacle of frustration and disgust. We cannot even, however, pretend that, as often in her fiction, France has stolen a march on us. For, stripped of some of its symbolism, *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, is in the tradition, not only of *Ulysses*, but also, except for the saving feature of their ironic grace, of the early Aldous Huxley. The ensuing decades have witnessed a further stage in the decline of Europe, from the effect of which none of us can claim to be immune. Yet the one-sidedness and lack of profundity of Sartre's presentation rarely escapes the effect of a not altogether convincing form of masochistic entertainment. In the state of

## The Novelist as Thinker

exhaustion following the occupation of France, it is not surprising that there is a public all too readily susceptible to the hypnotic influence of such an entertainment. There is a form of nutrition common to certain fungi which goes by the name of 'saprophytic'. This means feeding on rottenness. Its human counterpart, we are surely correct in concluding, is likely to occur and is only justifiable in times of spiritual famine.

In *Le Sursis*, the second novel in Sartre's trilogy, the characters of *L'Age de Raison* appear less frequently and the whole of the action is concentrated on the tension preceding Munich. This does not mean that Sartre uses a form of reportage which merely allows his characters to move about as a foreground to political incidents. There is no attempt to reconstruct the events of those febrile days on the conventional plan of a historical novel. Very cunningly Sartre captures the atmosphere of the times and the reverberations of the diplomatic issues as they affect various types of civilian. Here, as in Proust, time takes control; we are in Paris, Marseilles, Munich, Biarritz, without warning or linkage. The apparent discontinuity is at first bewildering and the reader's interest necessarily diffused. Finally however, as one forgets the momentary close-ups of Hitler, Daladier, Chamberlain and the rest, there are the giant Gros-Louis, who can neither read nor write, the pacifist, Phillipe and the psychotic Pierre who reflects 'c'était si délicieux d'avoir le mal de mer', in all their perambulations and love-making, to stimulate the attention. The emotional suspense of *L'Age de Raison* has given place to an apprehensive calm. Daniel has become the attentive husband; Mathieu is more able to acquiesce in his vacillation which he may now justify on the grounds of national emergency. Ivich, in the family circle, is free to indulge in self-commiseration and to reaffirm her liberty by a breakaway back to Paris, where she links up again with Mathieu. There is a finely drawn and accurate depiction of farewells and the disruptive effect of mobilization in the home. There is the long and verbose letter from Daniel to Mathieu, describing the adventure of his conversion to the Catholic religion.

And now with the whole machinery of war in preparation beneath their eyes, there comes the counter-shock of peace. 'Pas de guerre; pas d'avions sur Paris; les plafonds ne creveraient pas sous les bombes; il allait falloir vivre'. With the sobs of the disappointed Milan, the scene closes. Disregarding the existential

implications of the narrative, it is certain that Sartre with a commendable energy has succeeded in compiling a document of immense breadth and extreme vividness to commemorate the human reaction to one of the greatest crises in the history of the century, indeed, of the world.

#### IV

Without entering into the sources, the phenomenologist schools of Husserl and Heidegger, whence Sartre derived many of his ideas, a glance at the implications of his philosophy, as it may be supposed to affect belief and conduct, will not be out of place. That man creates his own being, is, as he contends, no new doctrine, but was equally the idea of Samuel Butler ('I, Ernest, am the god who made you') and Henri Bergson. To assert that 'chez l'homme l'existence précède l'essence' appears an assumption which neither Sartre himself nor any philosopher can conclusively demonstrate. More pertinent to the subject is the observation of Mme de Beauvoir that 'il n'existe entre le monde et moi aucune attache toute faite'. This, like so many existential squibs, is only a new way of stating an old truism, in this case, that man needs to adjust himself to his environment. A truism in our excessively analytical age, but nevertheless one of the most acute problems, and the main issue of *Les Chemins de la liberté*. It is not too much to say that once the problem arises in the individual's consciousness it tends to expand into a gnawing obsession. Immediately an individual finds his environment irksome, his choice between making the effort to free himself or succumbing resignedly would seem to depend on the strength of his self-esteem. If he is convinced that his happiness and security depend upon conformity to the standards of the majority, he will do his best to conform to them, at the price of sacrificing his inner development. On the other hand, he may become convinced that 'society' is mistaken and choose the path of subjectivity. It is true that in doing so, he may run the risk of starving or going mad and that his madness may be doubly dangerous because it may not appear as such to him and may only seem to reflect the unjustifiable judgment of society when his conduct happens to conflict with its especial code of behaviour. This is frequently so with the artist and the mystic. To such a man living out his subjective life, the antics of the ordered masses may well seem ridiculous. If however he integrates

## The Novelist as Thinker

himself to his own satisfaction, within, let us say, a relative isolation, his attitude will, in proportion to his intelligence, be far more tolerant to society, than society's towards him. If the few dub him hero, the majority will call him coward, and if circumstances threaten his freedom he will be more than ready to agree '*l'enfer c'est les autres*'. Once the interplay of projections begins in real earnest, however remote and self-sufficing the isolation of the individual may be, the voice of society will track him down in the guise of the super-ego. The more he convinces himself that society is ill-informed and hypocritical, the more relentlessly will it pursue him with its harrowing persecutions. For the one person society refuses to forgive is he who has the wits to find it out. We are, of course, speaking very loosely of 'society', since in a state of disintegration, nothing approaching the universality of the primitive tribe or the medieval state, with their ruthless enforcement of conformity, exists. Yet, as we know to our cost, taboos and inhibitions continue to operate with almost equally terrifying insistence. Hence arises the guilt that haunts all Sartre's characters, a guilt which cannot be ascribed to a single cause, but which is inherited alike from the collective unconscious, the religious reflex, and the idea of living in an age of freedom and of being unable, at the same time, to exercise it tangibly.

Of all the characters, none is more affected than Mathieu Delarue. We see it in his compunction about Marcelle's pregnancy and the theft from Lola, in his inability to make decisions. Owing overt allegiance to no moral code, one surely of the 'emancipated', like the three prisoners in the hell of *Huis Clos*, the overtones of self-reproach never leave him alone. He is as much their victim as the saints of the desert, as St. Anthony and Cassian. We see it with even more reason in Daniel, the homosexual 'angel' who lives in the constant shadow of society's disapproval despite his elegant mask of bravado, so that he turns in the end to God for compensation. We see it in the inconsequential Phillipe and the fatuous Gros-Louis who are ashamed even to be themselves, ashamed, in fact, of their *existence*. Yet all this abysmal self-depreciation is, on Sartre's own explanation, without reason. For '*la définition demeure toujours ouverte; on ne peut dire ce qu'est cet homme avant sa mort, ni l'humanité avant elle eut disparu*'. So what can we say of this assembly of victims? Are they in their sphere, a mere handful of pawns ably displayed by their progenitor to

illustrate the existential dilemma, or are they an amiable set of nit-wits on view to challenge the irony of critics? For we must not overlook that Sartre has drawn on a very narrow and notoriously anarchical circle of society to illustrate his thesis. So far his sincerity in ascribing to human individuals an epidemic of disgust and despair, is not at fault. Neurotic, in all conscience, and mindful of the cataclysmic anxieties of 1937-8, which we may, in our post-war euphoria very well overlook, they are certainly worthy of our sympathy. But even with these allowances, this neurotic minority, hardly justify deductions about the human condition in general. All we can do is to wait and see how Sartre disposes of them in *La Dernière Chance*. And even then it cannot be allowed that the experiment is more than sectional or provincial however valid it may be within its own limits as an advertisement of a new philosophy or a diagnosis of human ills to which no reasonable person can be blind. There is no final proof that humanity moves (or fails to move) in this way . . . only that certain types would show a tendency to behave in this way.

As for the influence of Sartre's ideas for good or evil, over which there is so much hue and cry among critics, in this country as well as France, we need not concern ourselves much. In the long run, with all its elaboration and jargon, this philosophy does but camouflage a familiar attitude, which lends itself to illustration in the figures of the children of a spoilt generation in their first impact with hard reality. The fact that Sartre never attempts to gloss their foibles (however outrageous, and there are in fact no colossal outrages) is simply evidence of his refusal to be hoodwinked by bourgeois hypocrisy. In this he is entitled to no more distinction than Baudelaire, Zola or Joyce. In that he makes much of the erotic fantasies of his folk, he is only showing himself a discerning psychologist, for which, when we consider the facile falsifications of most of the pseudo-romantic novelists of the moment, especially in England, he deserves every commendation. Indeed, I venture to express the heresy, that it is precisely when Sartre forgets his existential and phenomenological interpolations, when he is content to write as an artist, that he is most vivid and convincing. Whatever exception Catholics and Christian existentialists may take to this 'epic of the dung-heap' (as Proust designated the Rougon-Macquart series), they at least will be enabled to find abundant evidence of original

## The Novelist as Thinker

sin. In the realm of ethics, I cannot see that Sartre has done more than show that even in the absence of conscious religious belief and practice, the religious motive is still imperceptibly operative in man's behaviour. Specifically in the case of the characters of *Les Chemins*, it operates on the negative side as guilt or humility which are not Christian in essence but contain nevertheless the rudiments of the Christian attitude. Whether in his eyes this is their gain or their loss is difficult to determine. I can only repeat here the story of Mme de Beauvoir, Sartre's wife and disciple, who like her husband, is a professor of philosophy. One day (so the story goes) she took the top class of girls to the Asylum of St. Anne, to observe the behaviour of the lunatics. 'Regardez-les, mes enfants', she explained, 'il n'y a pas du bien ou du mal. Voici l'acte gratuit.' And we may suppose that the astonished children were edified to witness the enviable maniacs swallowing pins and beating up their neighbours without provocation, and returned with pity to the outer world of socialized hebephrenics petrified by the illusion of ethical liberty. Reverting to the characters of the novel, what is perhaps most significant in their make-up is the almost complete absence of altruistic feeling, not in the sense of an entire self-surrender to a wider purpose (excepting Brunet, the Communist) but of an occasional self-effacement in the interests of 'les autres'. Egocentric to a degree, they live only in the frigid twilight of an illusive freedom, their expectancy riveted to a dawn of self-fulfilment which never happens.

Such an attitude accords, of course, with Mme de Beauvoir's assertion: 'il n'existe entre le monde et moi aucune attache toute faite.' The problem of Sartre's unfortunates is not merely the problem of their relation to others, but the problem of themselves in relation to others. We can detect here the wounded pride of contemporary man in finding himself no longer the centre of the universe. French poetry as well as fiction since *Madame Bovary* has tended to concentrate on the pursuit of the 'self', through processes of analysis and introspection, which carried to an extreme can only yield a narcissistic impotence. In Gide, as Wallace Fowlie explains, the insistence is on the severance of family ties as a hindrance to self-development. In Sartre's novels, this freedom from family ties has already been achieved. Yet in their behaviour, the symbolic factor of what psycho-analysis describes as 'the rebellion against the father' continues to operate.

The need to experience the present, from being an ideal or an unconscious urge has become a duty. The imperative to self-expression has become painfully urgent in the impulse to initiate an 'acte gratuit', however senseless. It cannot be said that their state is enviable. The net result of their independence, which they are ready enough to sacrifice to the inexorability of the war, is a morbid isolation. They lack all belief, or the inner resources through which they might find the resolution of the dilemma within themselves. They present for the first time in French fiction, the appalling spectacle of the prostitutes of freedom.

Far from being without primary attachments, it would be more true to affirm that man from birth undergoes a series of fixations, and that the last, and most difficult of his relations is that which he attempts to establish with the universe itself. To affirm this is to enter the field of metaphysics. The real remedy for these moribund adolescents is a transformation through the agency of a sense of values, a transformation at which Sartre never hints. Yet what he has invented (if we may call his Particular Form of existential philosophy an invention) is no less than a secular religion without imagery, revelation or a Messiah. so the French may at least congratulate themselves that out of the putrescence of war, an idea has been evolved to challenge the resuscitation of that succulent rhetoric in many of her writers, which at this stage of the European drama carries neither sense nor solace. To infer that Sartre acquiesces in a verdict of final pessimism would be premature. If we compare the tone of the novels to that of his editorials in *Les Temps Modernes*, there would appear to be two Sartres. There is the human analyst of the novels and treatises, whose laboratory work reveals a most appalling, if not desperate pathological condition; there is the Sartre who carries some vision of the future which, not yet articulate, is the source of an intensive energy which we cannot doubt is concentrated on the recuperation of France. 'Les intellectuels anglo-saxons', he writes challengingly, 'qui forment une classe à part, coupée du reste de la nation, sont toujours éblouis quand ils retrouvent en France des hommes de lettres et des artistes étroitement mêlés à la vie et aux affaires du pays.'<sup>1</sup> That is impressive. So far, perhaps characteristically in view of the central paradox of his philosophy, these two Sartres have not been reconciled in any work. Perhaps this is the next step?

<sup>1</sup> *Les Temps Modernes*, No. 2.



## MAURIAC'S DARK HERO

WALLACE FOWLIE

### I

MAURIAC'S province, which was Montaigne's also, plays a much more significant part in his novels than that of a mere setting. The sombre and somewhat sad city of Bordeaux and the countryside around Bordeaux, composed of pine forests, vineyards, stretches of sand and large isolated houses, have helped to form the sensitivity of the novelist. He is no regionalist writer in a narrow sense, but the physical and spiritual qualities of his province exist in close alliance with the characters of the novels. The province is part of the poetry and part of the drama in each of the books, to the same degree, so difficult to measure, as in the novels of William Faulkner about the deep south. Mauriac does not sing directly or blatantly about his province, as Barrès did about his. He is always concentrated on the landscape of the soul, but this interior landscape reflects the romantic wildness and solitude of Les Landes.

The childhood of Mauriac was completely provincial in accordance with the most sober of traditions, and was dominated by piety and devotion to family. He was one of five children. His father had died when the boy was only a few months old, and his mother had full responsibility in bringing up the family. The house was lovingly but austere governed. Evening prayers in common and numerous religious practices were a fixed part of the day's routine. François was a sickly looking child who feared each day that his lessons were not sufficiently learned and was seized with terror in front of his school teachers. Many of these childhood memories are transposed in his novels, but when M. Mauriac began his autobiography, of which only a few pages appeared, *Commencements d'une Vie*, he found the literal transcription of these memories too painful to execute.

He studied at a Catholic school where, even during the winter, the pupils rose at 5.30 in an unheated dormitory and where some degree of heroism was necessary for the simple act of washing. At the four o'clock recess period, he was usually vanquished in

the disputes which would arise between himself and his sturdier comrades, and he feared that these physical defects prefigured a life of anguish and violence. It is little to be wondered that the need to write and to express himself was felt very early. The evenings became for the boy the most precious part of the day, when he acquired the taste and the genius for solitude and when he practised writing in a journal and composing his first verses.

The purity of his childhood and early adolescence was dominated by a deep love for his mother. She wondered at his preference for solitude and study, but respected his temperament which was already formed. Until twenty, Mauriac lived the ordinary existence of provincial adolescents: a repressed life, largely expressionless. The city of Bordeaux impressed itself on his sensibility: midnight masses in the Cathedral of Saint André, the large sinister-looking houses, the monotonous suburbs, and, beyond them, the flat Landes: vineyards, pine trees, cicadas, wild birds, heather, ferns. 'L'histoire de Bordeaux', Mauriac writes in *Commencements d'une Vie*, 'est l'histoire de mon corps et de mon âme.' Mauriac is the 'Bordelais' whom Bordeaux prevented from visiting Rome or London. As a child, when he was preoccupied with the gravest problems, such as 'the state of grace' he was in or others were in, when he was compressed within himself and lacking any expansion of spirit, he felt between him and his city a complicity and a strong alliance. The oldest sections of the city had their particular odours for him, and at Christmas-time, in the noisy crowded rue Sainte Catherine, he watched the girls selling the fresh sour-tasting oysters which had come from the *bassin* of the Garonne, as if he were an integral part of the scene and the entire life of the city. When he entered alone the nave of the cathedral, he knew a happiness which he felt must be comparable to that of an insect burrowing into the earth.

Mauriac's obsession with Bordeaux has not prevented the exercise of his critical faculties. He both hates and loves his city and its inhabitants. He has always lived close to the bourgeoisie and observed, from his earliest years on, its vices and virtues. One of the major conflicts of his mind, which has been used in many of his writings, arose from his watching the sedate, prudent and circumspect race of the bourgeois during mass. The striking paradox, for example, of the midnight mass at Christmas, with its Gospel asceticism: 'He was born in a manger', and the rich

## The Novelist as Thinker

members of the bourgeoisie dressed in their fur coats, has disturbed Mauriac and motivated many of his pages. He has never ceased to worry over the close proximity of the celebrated Bordeaux truffles and the Communion table.

### II

Mauriac's meditations on the moral and religious problems of man have been closely associated with his meditations on the rôle of the writer, and more especially on the function and the responsibility of the novelist. The work of the writer is for Mauriac the justification of his life. He would consider that his novels contain the essential truth about his life and his mind. His pages of fiction represent a closer approximation to truth than any purely factual rehearsal of his life. In every page of his novels, the novelist is at the bar defending himself and his ideas and pleading for the justification of his existence.

The novelist draws upon the memories of a life-time. Rather than being dispersed or effaced, each memory is recorded permanently within him: each face he saw, each word he heard, every anecdote that was told to him, every accident he witnessed. The rooms, the houses and the gardens, which serve as the background for Mauriac's novels, are inevitably monotonous because they were all observed by him in Bordeaux and in the family estates outside Bordeaux. Friends and neighbours of Mauriac have been startled in recognizing in his novels their own rose garden or their own living room. But they were even more astonished at reading the sombre dramas which unfolded in the familiar setting. The secret of the novelist was the discovery of the hidden monsters in the seemingly inoffensive characters who lived in the houses and walked about the gardens. Against the background of decorous conventionality in a Bordeaux household and the logically patterned gardens, Mauriac has projected characters of illogicality, of passion and complexity. These are his creatures and his creations. He is concerned with the deepest motivations within them, with their suppressed desires and their unspoken dream fantasies.

If therefore the content of Mauriac's novels is sombre and passionate, the actual form of his writing, like the symmetrically ordered gardens of his settings, is lucid and classically direct. The chastity of his style permits him to say anything he wishes about

his characters. The disorder of crime and chaotic mental states in the novels of Mauriac is offset by the sense of order which controls his writing. The total absence of melodrama in his style permits the violent drama of the characters to take on its full objectivity. The simplicity and understatement of the sentences help to increase the torments of the creatures, which in many cases is unarticulated.

Mauriac believes that behind each novel there exists to some degree a part of the novelist's own life, a personal drama either directly experienced or imagined. Thus the writing of the books becomes a deliverance of personal suffering or passion, of suppressed anger or desire. And the characters in the books almost resemble scapegoats, mystically loaded with the sins which had been committed or imagined by the novelist. A defect in the character itself of a novelist, when it is transplanted in his work may grow unexpectedly in stature and significance. The novelist's art is a transposition and not a reproduction of the real.

François Mauriac occupies a very special place among the Catholic writers of contemporary France. His work, completely innocent of didacticism or proselytism, is devoted to the study of sin, evil, weakness, suffering. Sanctity is not one of his themes. He has confessed that he always fails in the depiction of virtuous characters. Pietistically minded Christians as well as non-Christians have found it difficult to accept this trait in Mauriac. Gide at one time chided Mauriac for the preponderant place he gives to evil in his novels, for the compromise, as he defined it, which permits Mauriac to love God without losing sight of Mammon. Gide continued his argument by saying that if he were more fully a Christian, he would not be able to follow Mauriac quite so easily.

The major attack on Mauriac's conception of the novel (whereby Mauriac believes the novelist comparable to God, having full knowledge of his creatures, although never denying them freedom of will) came from Jean-Paul Sartre, in an article written before M Sartre enjoyed the fame he does to-day.<sup>1</sup> The existentialist argues that the Christian writer, because of his belief in man's freedom, is admirably suited to write novels. Dostoievski would be a leading example. But Mauriac, according to Sartre, sees the

<sup>1</sup> *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, Février 1939.

## The Novelist as Thinker

whole of his universe at all times. His dialogue, like that of a play, is always efficacious, in the sense that it is planned and organized and moves rapidly ahead. Whereas the characters of Dostoievski, Faulkner and Hemingway do not know what they are to say next. They are freer than the creatures of Mauriac. And M. Sartre concluded that God is not an artist and neither is François Mauriac! This criticism of Sartre greatly limits the art of the novel. Mauriac is a descendant, not from other novelists, not from the realists Balzac, Flaubert and Zola, but from Pascal, Racine and Baudelaire whose sense of tragedy demanded a certain aloofness of attitude and an abstraction or purgation in style.

In the majority of cases, the Catholic writer in contemporary France, is the convert, either from Protestantism or Judaism, or the man who returns to the faith of his childhood: Bloy, Péguy, Psichari, Maritain, Du Bos, Rivière, Claudel. But Mauriac has never been separated from Catholicism. He has never had to explain or prove a change of mind and a new adherence. Like Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld, to whose lineage he really belongs, Mauriac has steadily contemplated human behaviour from a single position. He, like his moralistic predecessors in the history of French thought, has watched, not the exterior mannerisms and superficial garb of men and women, but the secrets and frustrations which grow in the dark of their subconscious and prevent their inner life. A text from St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* illustrates the essential dilemma of the Mauriac character: 'For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.'<sup>1</sup>

### III

One of the constantly reiterated themes in the writings of Charles Péguy is the important position which the sinner occupies in Christendom. 'Le pécheur est aussi de chrétienté.' The novels of Mauriac illustrate this significant and dramatic rôle of the sinner. It was particularly after the publication of *Les Anges Noirs* in 1936, that the criticism of Mauriac's themes grew almost into a storm of protest. Wasn't it a sign of morbidity and unhealthiness, his detractors questioned, that the world of evil depicted by this novelist was so uniformly black and despairing? Doesn't this perpetual preoccupation with sin and perverseness indicate a

<sup>1</sup> Rom. vii. 19.

connivance or a compliance with them? His work has often been called a scandal and Mauriac has been asked repeatedly to defend and justify himself.

His answer is always the same. He is interested in the problem of evil, and finds nothing exceptional or outrageous in his characters. The newspapers alone furnish sufficient proof that in every city every day crimes are committed which are not more strange or more monstrous than those in his novels. The novelist simply isolates one of those cases and analyses its genesis and its development. A novel is a steady floodlight focused on one of the lurid stories of passion which the journalists dispatch with flagrant disinterestedness. Mauriac has called his novels a matter of 'lighting'.

The characters of Mauriac represent that kind of human nature, formed and conditioned by a long background of orthodox Christianity. Even if in many of the characters, there is only a nominal or hypothetical adherence to the Catholic faith, the deepest part of their natures reacts to the forces in them and around them as if Christianity, acknowledged or unacknowledged, governed the beginning and the end of human existence. In such natures as these, the struggle between good and evil is clearer and more dramatic than it would be in others. It is true that the Calvinist as well as the Catholic may experience a kind of terror when he has committed sin or when he is alone with his passions, but it would seem that the Catholic, more than other Christians, feels a more metaphysical or historical terror in the presence of sin and in the memory of sin. Every sin committed by others affects him in some way and augments his personal drama. There is a profound solitude in many of Mauriac's characters, but the solitude is controlled by an ancient knowledge of sin. They are immobilized, not so much by their own personal experience of sin, as by some ancient sense of responsibility for the sins of mankind. The Catholic is more attached than other men to the imperfections and the failures of the world. Each day, even if he performs his religious obligations in the most perfunctory manner, even if he does not perform them at all, he ties himself up with the sins of the dead, he fills his solitude with the terror which comes from the sense of solitude created by the alienating force of sin. The barrenness of the Mauriac scene is in constant complicity with the barrenness of his creatures' hearts, but it would be difficult

## The Novelist as Thinker

to discover in any literary tradition a more cosmic sense of evil.

The general climate of Mauriac's novels may appear unhealthy to many readers because it is dominated by the more sombre aspects of passion. The sexual problem, never blatantly stated, is at the centre of each of the books. The drama takes its origin in the most secret of all meeting places within a human being: the place where religious aspiration, or at least religious conditioning, collides with sexual desire. In most of Mauriac's characters, this sexual desire is repressed and continues half hidden, half forgotten until it breaks out in some tensed abnormality. The problem is always there, waiting in the dark, so to speak, but its presence is felt in all the actions and decisions of the characters, as well as in their periods of loneliness and in their attitudes of waiting. Although Mauriac seldom gives any direct expression to the sexual problem, he is concerned with the degree to which it adumbrates and even controls all other problems. Concupiscence ties up the soul with the body, and becomes in itself an indistinguishable commingling of spiritual aspiration and passionate urgency. Mauriac finds in the sexual origin of each life, not an absolute determinism, but a bent and an inclination which constantly threaten the possible sanctity of human life. Each one is tested to a degree proportionate with his nature, because of this dark origin of the flesh. This is the world of evil, for Mauriac, whose site is the heart. The other world in his novels, of Bordeaux and Les Landes, serves only to delineate more sharply and more poignantly the ancient world of the heart.

## IV

As early as 1923, in his novel *Génitrix*, François Mauriac attained to a full expression of his art. Condensation of style, starkness of passion, the isolation of a lonely provincial house are the characteristics of this book as well as of every other major book of Mauriac. He is complete and identical in each novel. He returns always to the same problem and the same setting, more rigorously perhaps than other artists whose works are repetitions with variations: Molière, Dickens, Henry James. Such an artist usually succeeds five or six times in creating works of remarkable fusion between temperament and subject matter. They wilfully repeat the same story until it emerges clear and perfected.

*Génitrix* appears as one of the earliest finished masterpieces of Mauriac. The quality of writing, the sense of tragedy and the moral preoccupation in the novel are all integrated in more subtle proportions than in many of the first books.

The opening passage of *Génitrix*, the first five or six lines, indicate with extraordinary precision the involved relationships of three characters, who turn out to be the three main characters of the novel. I know of no other novel whose initial sentences plunge the reader more persuasively into the central drama, or by which the reader's attention is more dramatically or more instantaneously fixed on the psychological problem around which the entire novel is to evolve.

Elle dort.

—Elle fait semblant. Viens.

Ainsi chuchotaient, au chevet de Mathilde Cazenave, son mari et sa belle-mère dont, entre les cils, elle guettait sur le mur les deux ombres énormes et confondues.

The tone of the opening lines pervades the entire first scene which serves as prologue to the work. The young wife, Mathilde Cazenave, is dying. She is morally alone, and physically alone in the large house of her husband's family. Her husband, Fernand, and his mother, Mme Félicité Cazenave, have abandoned her at this supreme moment. She is the outsider, deeply hated by her mother-in-law who dominates her son with the tyranny of a matriarch. The miscarriage which Mathilde has just suffered is a triumph for the mother-in-law, who reminds her son as they talk together during the evening, that the baby would have been a girl and therefore would not have perpetuated the name of Cazenave.

Mathilde realizes that her mounting fever is fatal and that her death has been planned by Félicité, who saw no need of keeping someone in the sick room. Her life history passes before her and especially the failure of her marriage. Hers has been a life without love. Death comes gently to her because she had never been consumed in love. The scene is speechless and Mauriac executes it with brevity and with a tone of abstraction as if he, the creator, watched his creature die without being able to help her. The few simple facts of the case history and the condensed poetic rhythms re-enact the solitude and the desolation of the prologue.



## The Novelist as Thinker

Ce corps allait être consumé dans la mort et il ne l'avait pas été dans l'amour. L'anéantissement des caresses ne l'avait pas préparé à la dissolution éternelle. Cette chair finissait sans avoir connu son propre secret.<sup>1</sup>

Then the real drama begins, during the hours when Fernand watches beside the body of his wife and begins to feel for the first time in his life a sense of suffering for someone else. Mathilde has had to die, in order for him to feel united with her against the enemy in the house who had willed their separation. Mathilde's absence becomes a real presence from this time on. Fernand's silence, which characterizes the first scenes between him and his mother after the funeral, are really filled with the inaudible conversation he is carrying on with Mathilde. Once his new character is formed, the second part of the drama breaks out with the series of violent scenes between himself and Félicité. Mathilde grows into the triumphant presence in the house. She alone counts now as the son and his mother flay one another with their words and their accusations. This second part ends with the paralysis of Mme Cazenave and her death. The intermittent flashes of tenderness which Fernand shows for her during the last months of her life, are due, he tells her, to Mathilde's influence, and this represents for the aged woman the greatest defeat and humiliation. At the burial scene, again in the brief space of five or six lines, Mauriac recapitulates the entire drama and shows the progress in Fernand's character and the new relationship between the three characters. He leans over the grave opened to receive his mother's body, in a desperate effort to catch sight of his wife's casket. 'Nul ne comprit qu'il cherchait seulement à discerner, entre toutes ces formes dans l'ombre, la boîte où ce qui fut Mathilde redevenait poussière et cendre.'<sup>2</sup>

The third and final part of *Génitrix* is the justification of the title. Up to this point, Fernand Cazenave had existed in terms of his love and hate for his mother, but now that she has gone, he gradually ceases to exist as a human being. During her lifetime she had been the sun goddess, the creator of life, the provider and sustainer. With her extinction Fernand has no longer an orbit in which to revolve. 'Le soleil maternel à peine éteint, le fils tournait dans le vide, terre désorbitée.'<sup>3</sup> The old servant in the

<sup>1</sup> Ch. iii.

<sup>2</sup> Ch. xiv.

<sup>3</sup> Ch. xv.

household, Marie de Lados, who represents fidelity to the faith and to the race, a humble counterpart to the matriarch, assumes now the dominant rôle of humanity in the house. Félicité was the solar principle, the Paganized concept of *Génitrix*, race-founder, cold and invulnerable. Marie is the earth principle, the obscure repository of the seed, the toiler, whose hands are centuries old and whose life unfolds in the dark. She is not the matriarch who creates and strikes down. She is the mother who reproduces and perpetuates, and she introduces into the Cazenave house, where two women have died and where one man lives in a kind of death, a young boy, Raymond, her grandson. The old servant creates around him the new centre of life.

The final scenes of the book are as tragic and bare as all the preceding ones. Enraged at Marie when she tries to seat her grandson at the master's table, Fernand orders them both out of the house. Then for a few hours he knows the experience of total solitude, of total silence which represents the fullest tragedy in this novel of silences and empty rooms. But at the very end, Marie returns to the master's room and stands at the doorway holding a lamp. He calls to her. With the last sentence, therefore, the absolute tragedy ends, and a new history begins.

*Génitrix* is dedicated to Mauriac's brother, a physician, and the inscription refers to the characters as 'patients'. But there is always hope for the sick. Even in the creation of the character Félicité, Mauriac reserves a spark of hope. No human life ever closes off irremediably the hope of eternal salvation. Every act of monstrosity and every deformation may be redeemed. Natural love, no matter how far it may be warped, no matter how insidiously it may destroy the object of its love, is never totally cut off from its participation in divine love. The profoundest meaning of *Génitrix* is to be found in the original title which Mauriac had planned to use: 'Il n'est qu'un seul amour.' The phrase occurs in the text itself, in connection with the matriarch, in a scene of rage, during which the novelist felt that even the hatred of Félicité for Mathilde concealed an origin of pure love. 'Peut-être n'est-il qu'un seul amour,'<sup>1</sup> he writes and this testifies to the belief that all manifestations of love, even sinful and harmful forms, rise up from the same unique source. The heart does not cease loving as the body grows old. The ever-increasing lethargy of the house is an

<sup>1</sup> Ch. vii.

## The Novelist as Thinker

objective correlative for the aging bodies of Fernand and his mother. But the passion in their hearts does not decrease. It continues, only to grow more and more deviated.

### V

Two years after *Génitrix*, Mauriac published in 1925, *Le Désert de l'Amour*, which may well be the supreme example of his art. Both the tragedy in the novel and its form are more measured, more elliptical, more skilfully fused than ever before in his work. *Le Désert de l'Amour* is an example of classical art, if one accepts Gide's definition of classicism as it appears in *Incidences*: 'le classicisme tend tout entier vers la litote. C'est l'art d'exprimer le plus en disant le moins. C'est un art de pudeur et de modestie.'<sup>1</sup> This precept applies as strictly to Racine's art as to Mauriac's, and one can't help wondering if the fate of Mauriac's writings will be comparable to Racine's in being the least accessible of modern French art forms to other nations. The French have a strong predilection for litotes in art and a permanent tradition in their literature for a sober condensed casting of the gravest psychological problems: Scève, Racine, La Rochefoucauld, Baudelaire, Valéry, Mauriac.

The construction of the novel permits a rapid narration. The opening scene takes place in a Paris bar where the hero, Raymond Courrèges, aged thirty-five, is observing his features in a wall mirror and realizing that the first signs of age are more apparent on his life than on his face or body. A woman enters the bar whom he recognizes. She is Maria Cross, whom he had known about twenty years before in Bordeaux, and with whom he had fallen in love when he was eighteen and she twenty-seven. The meaning of the title is already apparent from this initial scene. Maria Cross is the woman whom Courrèges considers responsible for the hardness of his character. He has known many women but has never been able to fall in love with any one of them since his first wild passion for her. Before he speaks to Maria in the bar, his mind goes back to the two years of his youth, between sixteen and eighteen, when he was tormented by his love, and the main part of the novel begins. This is a study (only one among many in Mauriac's writings) of adolescent passion, of the incommunicability of sensuous love, of the strange law by which men fall

<sup>1</sup> *Incidences*, p. 40.

in love with beings who do not love them. Mauriac says, as Racine did before him, that we do not choose those whom we love. They appear in our lives and we are incapable of not loving them. Hence, the desert of love, the solitude and the barrenness of love.

The story unfolds in a setting of family life which represents, on a first level, the desert of love. Between Raymond and his father, Dr Courrèges, there exists an abyss of misunderstanding: Raymond feels hostility toward his father, who, in his turn, is incapable of expressing to his son any of the paternal tenderness which he feels. There is a similar estrangement between the doctor and his wife and between the other members of the family. This is the background of family incommunicability against which Mauriac sets the dual passion of father and son for the same woman. The love of the doctor for Maria Cross is composed of longing and tenderness. It is middle-aged love, far more idealistic and patient than the son's love for Maria, which is violent and sharp. Two remarkable scenes illustrate the divergence of these loves: Raymond's attack on Maria and his abortive attempt to seduce her; and the doctor's professional visit to Maria when she is ill and the deep love he feels when he examines her body, in his physician's capacity.

Maria's personal drama is more subtle and intricate than that of the two men who pursue her, each according to his own temperament and age. She is characterized essentially by languor. Her most familiar posture is on a bed or divan where, half dreaming, she tries to fix more clearly the lines of her thought and the forms of her desire. The sensuality of her nature, which is strong intermittently, changes constantly into a maternal kind of tenderness. She is the type of woman who arouses sensuality in men, and then wishes to treat them as children. She prefers from the doctor his letters to his visits. After attracting Raymond and desiring him, she finds his advances brutal. As soon as she feels herself desired, she becomes indifferent. The characters around her, chose her. She didn't choose them. This thought, which Mauriac finds in the mind of Maria Cross, is a further description of the desert of love. 'Ah! l'importunité de ces êtres, à qui notre coeur ne s'intéresse pas, et qui nous ont choisis, et que nous n'avons pas choisis.'<sup>1</sup> Her passion is idle and languorous. She is

<sup>1</sup> Ch.v.

## The Novelist as Thinker

consumed in a desert solitude, as if she were a modern counterpart, although far less dramatically presented, of Racine's Hermione and Phèdre.

The dramatic quality of Racine's heroines is transposed in Mauriac's art to the adolescent heroes, as in the case of Raymond Courrèges in *Le Désert de l'Amour*. The passion of adolescence is at once the most violent and the most ephemeral. In describing the development and urgency of Raymond's passion, Mauriac has made an admirable use of a tramway in Bordeaux. There Maria and Raymond see one another first and continue to meet daily many times before daring to speak. The tram symbolizes the brevity of these meetings, their chance, their irregularity (Raymond is still a schoolboy and Maria a young woman who has had a child), and their anonymity. The fact that Maria Cross is ostracized by the society of which his family is a part, intensifies Raymond's attraction to her. There is a kinship between Maria's loneliness in Bordeaux, her rôle of pariah and languorous courtesan, and the insistent sexuality of the adolescent which cuts him off from the world, as it does every adolescent, especially the family world in which he had lived as a child before the sexual need clearly pronounced itself.

This theme of the great isolating power of sexuality, apparent notably in adolescence, is one of Mauriac's most persistent themes. It is more overtly developed in *Le Désert de l'Amour* than in other books. The novel seems to derive its form from the sharpness and the relentless quality of the passionate instinct in Raymond Courrèges. His character grows around the new force in him. The central part of the study, which drains and reflects all other parts, is the hero's increasing assurance of his maleness and of his indifference to everything in the world that his body was not created to penetrate. The sentence I have just paraphrased, which concludes the sixth chapter, is an illuminating example of the psychological import of the Mauriac theme and the purified form into which it is cast. 'La nuit d'été battait en vain ce jeune mâle bien armé, sûr de sa force, à cette minute, sûr de son corps, indifférent à tout cela que ce corps n'était pas créé pour pénétrer.' After using the tramway as the symbol of the strangeness and the stark anonymity of the first meetings and longings of Maria and Raymond, Mauriac uses an exterior scene of nature as prelude and prediction for the central scene of attempted seduction. A violent rainstorm

ravages the garden outside Maria's house. Raymond crosses it to come to her and can hardly contain the pent-up energies and desires which urge him to perform an awkward and frustrating scene. His passion is wasted like the garden itself and this defeat marks the beginning of his life of hardness, of his desert life in love.

At the end of the novel, after the rapid narration of Raymond's adolescent love, we are back again in Paris, at the chance meeting between him and Maria Cross. He is now a mature man, closer in many ways to his father, and he tests in himself the effect of this woman's presence and words. The fire is still strong and real within him. All his attempts to overcome and forget his passion with minor passions have failed. Raymond concludes—and this represents the psychological and moral conclusion of the book—that everything serves such a passion: that virtue irritates it and debauchery enhances it. His easy conquests, all that he had had in the world, was of no value by comparison with what he had not been able to possess. And thus, the theme of the desert of love joins with that of the mother love, through this second study of the oneness of passion. The son perpetuates the father in *Le Désert de l'Amour* by his fidelity to the unknowable or unexperienced love, in his relation with Maria Cross, as the son perpetuates the mother in *Génitrix* by the unaccountable power which comes to him in his struggle against the matriarch.

## VI

Mauriac's dark hero (cf. Jean Péloueyre in *Le Baiser au Lép-reux*, Fernand Cazenave in *Génitrix*, Raymond Courrèges in *Le Désert de l'Amour*) illustrates an entire aspect of Pascalian psychology, which still remains, especially in France, the chief source of psychological inquiry in the Christian tradition. According to this aspect of 'Pascalism', the human heart is the microcosm of the universe. Each individual heart is the reflector of the universe, the container of immensity. Mauriac studies in his hero's heart its tragic precision and uniqueness. Dostoievski's writing is very close to this conception of the heart, but Mauriac's art is more concentrated, more precipitous, and therefore more Pascalian.

Mauriac as a novelist combines in a subtle and well-nigh indistinguishable way the rôles of Freudian analyst, in his study of the secret of disorder, and of theologian, in his study of the origin of sin. Throughout the Mauriac novel, the deepest part of man

## The Novelist as Thinker

is imperilled. It is the dramatic representation in characters of Pascal's wager passage, and one can't tell which state will win out: grace or damnation. The typical novels, such as *Génitrix* and *Le Désert de l'Amour*, are inconclusive, because the novel, as Mauriac conceives of it, is the story of the peril (or the disorder) in which the dark hero finds himself, and the novel stops at the moment when the peril may come to an end.

Jansenist by temperament, both Pascal and Mauriac carry on in their writings a constant dialogue between appearance and reality. Pascal, abstractly as moralist and philosopher, and Mauriac, concretely as psychologist and novelist, depict the mysterious dignity of sin and the blindness of men who do not love what they think they love. If Mauriac appears Jansenistic by inspiration, he is not so doctrinally because of the freedom of his characters. In them he sees the constant unpredictable interplay of nature and grace. The leading trait of Mauriac's dark hero is perhaps his nostalgia for a lost purity. His hero's soul, no matter how perverted it has grown, is always considered by Mauriac in its quality of eternity and irresistibility. He is concerned, as Pascal was, with the existential character of the soul, with the wretchedness of the soul without God. Once Mauriac defined himself as being the metaphysician working with the concrete. His excessive use of the word 'drama' is a clue. In Mauriac's mind everything becomes a drama: love, passion, family, poverty, nature, evil, religion, grace.

Pascal and Mauriac appear as two lawyers pleading before God for the case of man. The sombreness of Mauriac's world recalls that of Proust, but there is nothing of the pleader in Proust. Mauriac believes that each man bears within him much more than himself. An out and out sinner is a myth. A man represents an accumulation of inherited tendencies. He is all his ancestors at once, as well as himself. The divisioning and bestowal of grace come from an unknowable system of economics where unpredictable correspondences occur. At the end of each of the two novels we have considered, the dark hero stands, not alone, but in an intricate relationship with his ancestors. He represents them as well as himself before God. But his will is not entirely bent to God, because in that case the devil as well as the novelist would lose his rights over man's soul.

## POETRY

### THE TERMS OF SELF

•  
CLIFFORD COLLINS

(for W. M.)

#### I

Origin is known in the sore angles of streets  
In an old face ironically tempered by death; and perhaps  
When the élan of flesh is seen in the face of a child  
Or felt when a church organ  
Shudders its music at dusk we acknowledge  
The terms of the argument—memory's confession  
Carved in stone, or the music and the shape in stillness  
Coming after the force of death.

There was terror in us  
Attending the burial, knowing a childhood of meaning  
Imprisoned in the distance as, held in darkness,  
We know of sunrise. Fingered by death  
We saw origin colouring the dead sun  
With carrion meaning. We could approach  
The image of our sickness—an effigy in bone;  
Or calculate the point of departure  
As a willow self-shadowed into darkness  
Over the water; we could crouch  
In the regressive note of prayer  
Not to be echoed in the black land  
But to remain here, at the burial.  
But we could make no offering  
For the dead cannot be offered  
To the living. Perpetually, the owl screeches  
When the moon cuts the night into a shape of dawn.  
And the wet earth into a carving of death.



## Poetry

Fragments of stained glass—the Ophelia of the eye,  
Rilke or Eliot—are known when the ruin  
Has been set aside, merged  
Into a deeper constancy. When the winter sunlight  
Troubles the air the trilling of sense  
Is gone in the soliloquy of the violin  
That never approaches completion. Not with a sense of loss  
But with a dread of failure do we leave the chapel  
For the pulse of days, the emotion of the wind,  
And the particulars of laughter.  
Gently, we lend our echo to the quick water  
Shuttering life on the far side, and  
The crocus, the scent of leaves, the trees  
Arc woven into a night of self.

## II

Fought,  
Lest the creators failed.

Old hands streaked with life offer a vessel  
Fashioned for my touch, and I  
Upon graven stone  
In the scythe weaved night  
Which minds only  
Memory's new colours  
Rooting the prayer,  
Lame.  
Fought it.  
Through me  
Pain stinged out.  
Night,  
You forged a sceptre  
I could not touch, made me  
Stain my lips upon the damp earth,  
Lips scabbed into silence.

Fought to be imprisoned  
In an old chant  
Of words I partly heard;  
A covenant  
To give me blood  
To make an offering,  
Lest the creators failed.

III

Night's web of trees  
Touches our tremor in the darkness  
To be still. But  
Touching the earth of winter  
In a night of death, watching a child  
Approach death as he turns in sleep,  
The eyelids covering communion, even  
Within this buried shape of self there is an image  
Of prayer eye-touched  
In its transformation.

Centre of eyes

Their own veiled sun, see now  
Prayer  
On the lips of the dead.

We interpreted wrongly

The skin's calm, the sick gloss of features, the tree  
That outlived you, to take you  
From the wider circle wherein you vanished.  
The wind shrouds with singing  
Both origin and memory.  
O why is the wind plumed with silence.

IV

Exile had led us past rocks and a troubled flowing—  
The enigma contained in sea. Under sky  
We had been six days hungry,  
Six days cold and afraid, waiting for waves

## Poetry

To push us inshore,  
And as the boat rocks on the crest,  
Listening  
As the cadence of sea  
Recurrently falls into silence.  
We knew of an old man's prayer  
And a girl kneeling.

Emerging from anguish, the violin  
Ceases to tremble upon flesh,  
The controlled impatience of hands  
Subsides,  
Self  
Perishes in experience.  
Veiled all  
But the pointing statue,  
An island of light faced upon blackness,  
And the eye quickening into an apex of sense,  
The figure kneeling.

## V

For the inwardly trembling lips  
There are columns, façades of different design,  
The faces of various saints on the lower plane,  
And higher the carving of death—somehow the oldest  
stone.  
We came from the skull of city  
And circled and stood  
To mount stone upon stone, making the years  
With our hands hidden equivalent  
For the skeletal tree to be outside our coma, the chant  
Undiscovered by lips. And the nearer eye  
Scaled the crevice in survival.

Following errant light  
We pass by the empty pulpit  
To an altar.

## THE SKELETAL TREE

The limbs stand upon safety, sure of their grasp  
And I fall upon the rich mouth  
Its rhythm of touch  
Catching a grave tune  
Torn from the eyes reproach.

Bleak eyes surpass anguish  
As the night breaks  
In our failing.

Grafted upon the temple of your skin  
My skeletal hands drop  
To protect their fragments. And fragile of possession  
Our thighs cast their love  
Rocking upon the assurance of daylight.

## OPHELIA

You waited for the lips of winter to touch your eyes  
Draw forth and bury death. Within  
You could not waken to the gall he gave you  
For his better part. The terror was in us.  
Gently, you lent your thought to the water,  
And with singing, shuttered death on the far side.

We take you from the wider circle  
Wherein you vanished. The other origin.  
But the loosened willow, the cast-off garland,  
Even the water were not transformed  
But stayed to claim the change as theirs,  
In them, unspoken.

SEVEN POEMS.

E. E. CUMMINGS

I

quick i the death of thing  
glimpsed (and from every side  
swoop mountains flimsying  
become if who'd)

me under a opens  
(of petals of silence)  
hole bigger than  
never to have been

what above did was  
always fall  
(yes but behind yes)  
without or until

no atom couldn't die  
(how and am quick i  
they'll all not conceive  
less who than love)

II

F is for foetus(a

punkslapping  
mobsucking  
gravypissing poppa but  
who just couldn't help it no

matter how hard he never tried)the

great pink  
superme  
diocri  
ty of

a hyperhypocritical D

•

mocra  
c(sing  
down with the fascist beast  
boom

boom)two eyes

for an eye four  
teeth for a tooth  
(and the wholly babble open at  
blessed are the peacemuckers)

\$ \$ \$ etc(as

the boodle's bent is the  
crowd inclined it's  
freedom from freedom  
the common man wants)

honey swoRkey mollypants

### III

a kike is the most dangerous  
machine as yet invented  
by even yankee ingenu  
ity(out of a jew a few  
dead dollars and some twisted laws)  
it comes both prigged and canted

IV

where's Jack Was  
General Was  
the hero of the Battle of Because  
    he's squatting  
in the middle of remember  
with his rotten old forgotten  
full of why  
    (rub-her-bub)  
    bub?  
    (bubs)

where's Jim Soon  
Admiral Soon  
the saviour of the Navy of the Moon  
    he's swooning  
at the bottom of the ocean  
of forever with a never  
in his fly  
    (rub-her-bub)  
    bub?  
    (bubs)

where's John Big  
Doughgob Big  
pastmaster of the Art of Jigajig  
    sitting pretty  
on the top of notwithstanding  
with his censored up a wench's  
rock-a-bye  
    (rub-her-bub)  
    bub?  
    (bubs)

V

why must itself up every of a park

anus stick some quote statue unquote to  
prove that a hero equals any jerk  
who was afraid to dare to answer "no"?

quote citizens unquote might otherwise  
forget(to err is human; to forgive  
divine)that if the quote state unquote says  
"kill" killing is an act of christian love.

"Nothing" in 1944 A D

•  
"can stand against the argument of mil  
itary necessity" (generalissimo e)  
and echo answers "there is no appeal

from reason" (freud)—you pays your money and  
you doesn't take your choice. Aint freedom grand

VI

no time ago  
or else a life  
walking in the dark  
i met christ

jesus)my heart  
flopped over  
and lay still  
while he passed(as

close as i'm to you  
yes closer  
made of nothing  
except loneliness

VII

(nothing whichful about

thick big this  
friendly  
himself of  
a boulder)nothing



## Poetry

mean in tenderly

whoms  
of sizeless a  
silence by noises  
called people called

sunlight

(elsewhere flat the mechanical  
itmaking  
sickness of mind sprawls)  
here

a livingly free mysterious

dreamsoul floatstands  
oak by birch by maple  
pine  
by hemlock spruce by

tamarack(

nothing pampered puny  
impatient  
and nothing  
ignoble

)everywhere wonder

## THREE POEMS

B. RAJAN

### 1. *The Perfect Crime*

The smash and skidder of your smithereens  
Is usually unique in fragmentation.

You sit upon your swoon, collect yourself.  
You know what's what when you know who began it.  
The thing defined can be expropriated.  
The thing reorganized is integrated.

The logic of the crime incriminates  
The perfect crime, completely criminal.  
Sets up retorts of mimicry between us.  
Horizons are always what the sun sets,  
A precipice where poetry can pass  
To deeper doom beyond disaster's walls.

So from your hideout you unearth yourself,  
Mocking the air of your substantial ghost.  
Catastrophe confines the murderer.  
A dead man looks at a familiar landscape  
Recalls himself, is hunted into kingdoms,  
And dies unbroken in his body's walls.

A dead man looks upon a deathless river.  
Always horizons glitter in his eyes.  
The stakes of Paradise, a murdered country,  
Deepen himself, divine him to belief.  
The thunder of the weak within the walls  
Of separate prisons is this man's disaster.

Horizons are always what the eye sets.  
The red sails rustle to deliverance.  
Beyond the curve, beyond the cryptic chasm,  
There is infinity, a waiting music.  
To be you must be other than this landscape,  
Where men in meekness live enduringly,  
Held up within the cage of hopeless killings.

## 2. *Nightride*

The blonde rears up on its upholstery,  
December takes you for a flimsy ride,  
The great car purrs into a dream's reproof.

## Poetry

Beside you sits a platitude of gangster,  
His cold eyes scissoring the road from stillness,  
The yes men of speedometers surround him.

Death takes a holiday in easy living  
A saunter tour through silken provinces.  
You jaunt like junket in your\*caravan  
Through presentable lands and poster mountains  
Feeling beyond your crush to blue horizons  
And context of the poetry you pose in.

Oh it is insolent to dream and dare  
To be the swagger man, the furious fact,  
Dream boat that has proposed to every landscape  
And comes home to the naming of itself,  
The true scenario of the femme fatale,  
Appointment with the script of silences.

You are the system which the blonde disposes,  
The great car purrs into a yawn of silence,  
The blonde pulls up the zippers of the road.  
The lux of her endures in every landscape,  
On every precipice of clung regrets  
She is the feeling of the death you close in.

Not to know her argues yourself unknown.  
To know is to possess her, pass beyond  
Her edict to the crown of silences,  
See her expense as silhouette to darkness,  
Downrush, windfall, a leap to lower logic.  
The blonde incorporated in its context  
Recoils. The ribbon of the road runs on.

### 3. *The Poet*

I knew him for his voice was soft and low  
A thing not meet in any politician  
Who needs equipment of new languages  
Speech to explore and profiteer thereafter.  
I knew him for his voice was sweet and low  
And did discourse most excellently willing.

Mute of all ornaments, conveyed to fact,  
Accented speech became the accents of  
All feelings. The evasions of despair  
Proposed themselves, imply fresh ravages.  
Tranquillity sustains a private hell.  
And sentences of stone will issue after.

A man who murders knows tranquillity.  
Peace comes within a corridor, a country,  
The single, the obsessive terminus,  
The mind's clear logic brilliantly converging.  
The true audacity is not to kill  
Or punctuate the pause with perfect killing.

The true audacity selects despair  
So deep despair that never action raises,  
A man seeks out the sentences of stone.  
To die is to be true beyond recalling,  
A man kills anger on the edge of darkness  
Where all perfections find themselves surmised.

Death of all voyagers' familiar faces,  
Is what you value most, because you are  
Annihilation is the poem's ending.  
A poem lives beyond the roots of space  
The definition of its death and darkness  
The seizing of such poems is to be.

The death of all such poems will enact you  
And darkness sets you free beyond restraint.  
To be is to be true beyond belief  
Truest to love whom your perfections sully.  
A poem lives beyond its ecstasy  
And love in truth restores its benediction.

## CONTRAST FOR NOVEMBER

BYRON VAZAKAS

Out from the house the autumn night  
crisps with its leaves the concrete  
road curving across the viaduct. The  
accurate detachment of spaced lights

Is clinical, is the calm diagnosis of  
disease. It is as though these lights'  
reflection were complete, as though  
anything could be true all by itself.

On a slope beyond the highway's bend and  
influence of light, the dead attain  
a quiet gaiety. The static of their  
stones is never sad, but satisfied.

Nearby the traffic whirrs. We stand so  
close it is as though suffering—like  
sudden motion in this dark—were merely  
a portent waiting to be realized. Pain

Creates its own time and space, and the  
distant shimmering windows turn abstract,  
and every home becomes a haunted house.  
The town, womb-like between its

Outstretched hills, receives the traveller,  
provides the tenure of all comfort by  
virtue of its human ugliness. From  
this height its cold collective glow

Denies the individual dark, rejects the  
neutral midnight cloud; and light's  
mirage is an oasis cruelly magnifying  
space. It is a landscape polishing

Tears, as autumn perpetuates the gestures  
of its leaves, diamond with death and  
frost. In the park the intricate black  
branches interlace above a furtive stream.

Like air greying before snow, the lonely  
crescent paths are strangely luminous.  
Traffic streaks to a sudden lull beyond  
the bridge, and light's hypocrisy betrays

The desolate, whitened space, confesses vacancy,  
admits that we are rich until we are alone.  
In the distance, the traffic's last auspicious  
rumble, wave-like, spends itself.

## CRADLED IN GRAVE OF GRIEF

C. BUSBY SMITH

Cradled in grave of grief wounded dove of the heart  
the dark stone stills your beating, the granite  
jaw of the black night walls in your wings' trembling;  
the blanched weed out of the bright sun twines  
fear-fingers leaf-wise throttling the shrill sound  
leaping in a last frenzy out of your cold prison  
Oh now inarticulate bird and burden of grief.

He shall step up from the dark circles of his death  
shadow-showered as the sun on a grey morning  
dawning with new strangeness; remote as your fled joy  
he shall stand on the fifth stair of memory, hands held  
fragilely in a faltering outthrust toward you,  
grieving maid in a veil of tears. Ever before  
and behind you but never now with you to stand.

## Poetry

But Oh this memory, carecoffined-widow of strange  
love, how bright shall it be in its darkness and deepness!  
As the remembered voice of the sea and the still remembered  
voice of the dead for those who desire them, will this  
patched picture of fallen manhood in a low tomb  
laid, leap to your after-grief light-quickenèd eye.  
Born out of cradle of grief, Oh the heart and the hand

Such new skill soon to show will strike back  
sure as the ebb of the tide on the shore and sure  
as the gull's down-curve to its harsh home on the rock  
harboured above sea, above pain; and time  
will merge and melt as tree and the earth and the sky  
in Christ's last miracle. And you and he living and dead  
shall be ever a buttress breaking the angry sky.

## SHORT STORY

### YOU NEVER GO BACK TO SLEEP

ARTHUR MIZENER

THE writers of the nineteen-twenties seem to feel like immigrants in the world you and I grew up in, as if they were puzzled by the overtones of the conversation around them and uncertain which way to turn when they get involved in any casual human relation. I suppose it's this as much as anything else which has defeated, personally anyway, those of them who sobered up in time to survive what Scott Fitzgerald once called the Lost Decade. At least that's the way it seemed to be with Walker Avery.

When he and his crowd began that ten-year drunk of theirs and ceased to notice what went on around them, the latest thing in serious attitudes was a kind of romantic sophistication which by 1939 people found it hard to take seriously. But I think you would have found it as difficult as we did not to take Walker seriously when he turned up in New Haven. He was habitually extremely polite and obviously went out of his way a good deal of the time to make commonplace and even banal conversation, as if, having given up the glib cynicism which was the only social manner he'd ever really learned, he was trying to construct a whole new one and had, like a college freshman, only got the beginnings of it worked out. But in spite of this manner there was a kind of intensity about him which you felt, as if somewhere behind the public front there was a wonderful life of the mind and feelings going on which came through in spite of him. The result was that nothing he said, however commonplace, seemed without its muffled overtones of irony and sentiment.

He was, of course, a legend to us. We were just old enough to have read *The Sinister Angel* at school and to have dreamed about the charmed life it described. I could remember that at the



## You Never go Back to Sleep

time even the sedate magazines like *The Literary Digest* had more or less assumed that Walker and his hero, John Ellis, were identical; and only a short time before he turned up, when I was looking through the stacks for something quite different, I ran across a characteristic account of him in *Town and Country*. I never can resist the fashions in women's clothes and automobiles of fifteen or twenty years ago and I began looking through some of the older volumes when I happened on *Town and Country*; and suddenly there was Walker, in handsome plus fours and with his hair parted in the middle, leaning on the door of a seven-passenger Pierce Arrow touring car. Some stylish architect had been asked to design imaginary houses for popular writers and there were about half a dozen drawings with photographs of the authors. There was a thoroughly phoney southern mansion for some character out of Joseph Hergesheimer and a rickety medieval castle in a lot of Maxfield Parrish trees and sky for Jurgen. But Walker Avery had been treated differently. There was no mansion for John Ellis or any of the other young philosophers of *The Sinister Angel*; the architect had designed a fantastic and gaudy palace for Walker himself. Its details had been suggested by the book—a design of cocktail glasses on what the text described as baroque pillars and a suggestion of Harkness, which had just been built then. Both Walker and John Ellis had lived in Harkness their senior years. But the mansion was for Walker.

Most of the readers of *The Sinister Angel* must have made this identification, and it probably had a good deal to do with Walker's enormous fame at the time, for as you look back on it now you can see that the American people—particularly the small-town people of the kind I grew up with—were dreaming of the possibility of a romantic and cultured American life. John Ellis and his friends—born in St. Louis and New Orleans, educated at Groton and St. Paul's, commuters during their undergraduate days from New York to New Haven for proms and football games—seemed to represent this life. I know the imitation Shaw and Ernest Dowson of the book seems pretty shoddy now, though you'd be surprised how the parts you didn't notice much then, the parts about New Haven life for instance, stand up. But when I read it as a Fifth Former at Hill it represented for me the ideal life, and two years later I went off to New Haven with perfect confidence to live it.

One of the most vivid recollections of my life is the depression which ensued as I gradually discovered, during my first term, what Yale was really like. For one thing you had to go to classes—even in 1926 you had to go to some classes; no one in John Ellis's time had gone to classes, and I wasn't prepared for it. And then Elm Street was just a dirty street, like the dirty streets of Pottstown and Dunkirk, not the glowing and mysterious place I had expected it to be. I made a pilgrimage to the room in Harkness where John Ellis was supposed to have lived and another to the room in Berkeley Oval where Walker Avery had, as a freshman, really lived. But there was nothing unusual about either of them, and even the lions in Berkeley Oval, which John Ellis and his friends had painted blue the night before the Harvard game of their senior year, seemed small and rather ratty.

But all this is irrelevant, except as it helps to show what an enormous impression *The Sinister Angel* made, the way it fell precisely into a mood which was, as far as I know, completely unconscious but very widespread and deep-seated in America at the time it was published.

When Walker Avery suddenly turned up in New Haven, then, he was like a ghost from the past. We remembered vaguely that he had gone on writing and for all we knew his books might have made a sort of success, but none of them had been national events like *The Sinister Angel*, and I doubt if there was one of us young instructors who had read a word of his since that first book. I know, at least, that he faded very rapidly from my memory sometime along in my sophomore year when I discovered Racine and began to argue with my family about going into teaching instead of into the family business in Dunkirk.

As luck would have it, I must have been one of the first people to realize that Walker was back in New Haven again. I had just come out of the freshman office on Wall Street and had turned down toward Elm with the idea of going to Yale Station and getting my mail when I heard a voice behind me begging my pardon. I turned and saw a man coming toward me in a leisurely way—at least it seemed to me leisurely; I learned later that he wasn't supposed to hurry. He was hatless and wearing a brown topcoat with the collar turned up in the back and altogether he looked at that slight distance so much the Yale man that for the few minutes it took him to come up to me I had that uncomfortable feeling you

## You Never go Back to Sleep

sometimes get that he was some one I knew whose name I had momentarily completely forgotten.

'Look', he said, 'where the devil have they put Yale Station in all this mess? It used to be in Berkeley Oval'—he glanced up the street ahead of us—'but if it comes to that, where, alas, is Berkeley Oval?' he shook his head in mock melancholy. 'Though heaven knows Berkeley Oval was nothing to regret.' And he looked up at me—he was a small man—with both eyebrows elevated and a kind of quizzical expression on his face, as if he were not only asking about Yale Station but thoroughly interested in what kind of person I was; it was very flattering. He hadn't changed appreciably in appearance and now that he was close to me I recognized him at once from the pictures. What greyness there was hardly showed in the curly blond hair—it was still parted in the middle but no longer slicked down—and the curious discrepancy between the fine, slightly turned up nose and the large brown eyes was as striking as ever. But it had been so long since I had thought of him that it took me some time to admit to myself that the man I was talking to, who was quite real, and Walker Avery, who was a legend, were the same man. I must have hesitated appreciably because presently the eyebrows went up an impossible eighth of an inch further, as if he knew exactly what was going on in my mind.

'I was just heading toward Yale Station', I said, 'if you'd like to walk along with me.'

'Fine', he said, 'which way?'

I was excited by that time and already impressed, partly, no doubt, by my own long dormant image of Walker Avery, but partly too by the sense of a complex and rich life which always surrounded the simplest thing he said. As far as I could ever make out he was completely unaware of having this effect on people.

Being impressed, I wanted to impress.

'If you want to see the ghost of Berkeley Oval', I said, waving my hand toward the master's garage which forms that corner of Berkeley College, 'we can go this way; if you want to avoid the New Yale'—I waved again toward Van Sheff—'we can take a detour.'

He grinned at me as if he were entering pleasantly into my little joke. 'Only the haunted haunt', he said. I had a vaguely disquieting feeling that this was a quotation which would mean more than it

appeared to if I could only remember its context. But then he added, almost as if he were speaking to himself, 'I don't notice ghosts much any more', and I thought I knew where we were again. We started toward Elm Street.

'On your right', I said, still trying to be funny, 'is the famous memorial to Mr Sterling. They say there is exactly one ounce of his ashes under the stand in the Rare Book Room which holds the Gutenberg Bible—at least the undergraduates say so.' But I could do worse than this, and did.

'On your left is Berkeley College, to make room for which they tore down the Oval. The lions are hidden over in the Power House and you can still see some of John Ellis's blue paint on them.' The minute I'd said it I was horrified. It was bad enough to invade his privacy, but far worse to do it by reminding him of the days when he had been a great and famous man. He looked at me for a moment with no discernible expression on his face—perhaps he was just waiting for me to go on—but he didn't say anything, and we walked the rest of the way to the corner of Elm Street in silence. When we reached the curb he stopped a minute and looked at Branford—what had been Harkness in his day.

'It looks dirty, doesn't it?' he said, almost to himself. 'I never thought of that.' Then, as if this abstraction of his were rude, he added apologetically, 'I haven't seen it for fifteen years, you know.' But even this perhaps seemed to him too self-centred; anyway, he went on.

'I suppose you must be a senior?'

An instructor is usually flattered at being mistaken for an undergraduate, but I was still worrying over my remark about John Ellis and took this for a reference to it. When I knew Walker Avery better I realized that he would have been incapable of any such reference. He was almost obsessed with a desire not to hurt people's feelings and he had a fantastic notion that he didn't understand them very well and had to proceed with the utmost caution. It would never have occurred to him, however, that I was embarrassed, because the Walker Avery of 1923 was someone he thought of with the kind of detachment we reserve for amusing but slightly silly historical characters like Pepys and Horace Walpole.

'No', I said, 'I'm an instructor in the French Department.'

'Oh!' he said, and turned as if he were going to say something

## You Never go Back to Sleep

more, but we were across Elm Street by that time and I had to guide him down the steps past Jerry and along the corridor to the mail boxes. As we were about to part he stopped me for a moment; he seemed almost shy.

'I—I wonder if we could talk some time?' he said. 'My name ——' he smiled at me in an odd absent-minded way and started again. 'I'm staying at the Lawn Club; would you have dinner with me some time? Just give me a ring; I'm there every evening.'

'Won't you have dinner with me?' I said in a kind of embarrassed rush, with some confused idea of making up to him for having been rude. 'You might like to see one of the colleges; I live in Jonathan Edwards——'

'Thanks', he said, 'perhaps we can do that sometime, but you must have dinner with me first.' He waited politely for a moment to see if I had anything more to say and then walked over to the stamp window.

It was soon all over New Haven as we always said, meaning the college community, that Walker Avery was back, for the college community in New Haven is still something of a small town in spite of the growth of Yale College into Yale University. To my surprise I learned in the next few weeks that he seemed to be making a kind of social impression on the more conservative members of the community who, having ancestors buried in the Egyptian horror of the Grove Street cemetery, considered themselves 'Old New Haven'. Some of them are intelligent people in spite of their ancestors, and at least one of them I knew, the wife of an older professor of history who had been a great beauty in her day, was a very wise woman. Her husband had taught me as an undergraduate, and when I came back to Yale as a graduate student after a couple of years at the Sorbonne, they began having me to dinner every month or so. One of these occasions came around just about this time, and when I arrived Mrs Garry was trying not to frighten one of the young instructors' wives she was always going out of her way to be kind to. She was one of those rare American women of great natural dignity and intelligence who might have come straight out of a late James novel, and this in itself was usually too much for the young wives; then she didn't know how to treat them as anything but equals, so that the conversation was always getting way beyond their depths.

When Professor Garry had given me my sherry she called me

over, and after struggling a little longer with the instructor's wife, she asked me if I had been in college with Walker Avery. I explained that there had been ten years between us.

'We had him here for dinner last night', she said. I must have looked startled in spite of myself because she smiled and went on, 'It does seem strange, doesn't it? I can remember very well when he was an undergraduate; as a matter of fact, Henry'—she nodded toward her husband—'knew him and he came to dinner once after we were married.' She saw her husband was listening and included him in the conversation.

'I was just telling Peter about Walker Avery's being here for dinner last night', she said, 'and that you knew him as an undergraduate. Of course', she said to me, 'Henry was the gay blade just back from Oxford then; it took me two years after we were married to make him stop wearing a green velvet jacket he brought back with him; I suppose it attracted the literary people like Walker.' I suddenly remembered that Professor Garry had been a friend of Walker's and the original of the young instructor in *The Sinister Angel* who knew all about French wines and read Lionel Johnson to a few select undergraduates in his candle-lit rooms.

'Nonsense, Mary', he said, and then frowned in a puzzled kind of way. 'He did seem terribly polite; I remember him as a lively and opinionated young man.'

'But we would hardly have had him to dinner on that account', Mrs Garry said. 'Janet Haight asked us if she couldn't bring him along with her and of course there's nothing we wouldn't do for Janet.'

There was nothing most of us wouldn't have done for Janet if she had let us. She was much the most beautiful girl I had ever known, with that rare kind of deep red hair which is partly blonde, so that it glows with an inner light of its own, and the delicate sort of colouring which lies just beneath the skin instead of on its surface—I've never seen it except with red hair and not very often then. She had a trick of smiling at you unexpectedly, as if she had just remembered suddenly how much she liked you, and I think it was this smile more than anything else that made you realize she was one of those exceptional people you can afford to be completely honest with because no vanity or false pride ever interferes with their understanding. She was reputed to have had

## You Never go Back to Sleep

a very sharp tongue before Harry Haight died, but I never myself heard her speak in anything but the gentlest way, even to the biggest fools. She had married Harry a month after she was graduated from Smith and it had taken him just five stubborn years more to achieve his life-long ambition of drinking himself to death. Since then Janet had been working in the library and living very quietly on her salary, despite the well-meant efforts of Harry's family and the rest of Old New Haven to give her a 'nice' life. Almost the only ones who knew how to treat her with respect and understanding were the Garrys, but she never ceased to be kind and gentle to them all.

I don't suppose there was a graduate student in New Haven with any sense who hadn't been in love with her, and some of us still were. But though she went out with us and listened when we sat on her couch into the small hours of the morning trying to be romantic for her, she always treated us as children, apparently on the strength of being three or four years older than we were. The only time I had ever seen her completely serious with any of us was on one such occasion when she interrupted me by suddenly leaning over and putting her hand against my cheek. 'You know, Pete', she said quietly, 'when Harry was alive I was in love.' She leaned back in her corner of the couch again. 'Just before he died he said to me, "Janet, you've got to get married again, but for God's sake don't make a fool of yourself twice; marry some one your age this time." He thought he was being very grown up to understand that it was childish to drink yourself to death for no reason at all. It was just like him to get so excited about seeing that that he didn't see the rest of it at all.' But it wasn't the least bit like Janet to ask people to invite her friends to dinner, and I couldn't help wondering if she'd met some one her own age when Mrs Garry told me about it.

It wasn't long until I thought I'd found out, for Walker Avery was soon going everywhere among Old New Haven society with Janet. They had apparently decided that Janet should marry him and were doing their best, in their way, to see that she did. I don't know how they managed to ignore his wife, for Nora Avery had been famous herself and she and Walker had cut a very wide swath for a few years after the publication of *The Sinister Angel*. When she had collapsed into dipsomania six or eight years before, everyone had heard about it. I suppose Old New Haven had too

but fancied the thing would be taken care of without discussion, as those things had been in their day. Any other solution would hardly have occurred to them.

Walker had the reputation with them of being a gentleman, I gathered; I suppose it was the painful politeness which led them to forget that he had never been like them. They soon learned better, however, for presently Walker made one of those slips which, for all his concern for the feelings of others, he occasionally did make. He had been dining with Janet at the Ordways—old Ordway's father had been president of the university—and had said quite casually in explanation of some mistake that Janet had told him about it one morning while he was in the shower and probably he hadn't heard her clearly.

That was the end, of course, of his career in Old New Haven society; even Mrs. Garry had to stop having them to dinner with other people, though I suspect Janet and Walker were there by themselves a good deal more than Mrs. Garry let people know. At least, she said something to me about them later which I don't believe she could have known if she hadn't seen a good deal of them together. 'Janet', she said, 'changed when Harry died. After that you never were really sure you were talking to her. I don't mean she didn't listen to you or anything like that, but it was as if she were doing something she didn't care much about one way or the other because she was fond of you and knew you wanted her to. Walker's the only other person I've ever known who was the least like that. When they were together they were like children—children who knew everything.'

On the whole they must have been happier for the collapse of Walker's social career; I can't think they enjoyed Old New Haven. After the blow-up they stopped pretending, except in the most conventional way, that they were not living together, and it was at that time that we younger instructors began to see a good deal of them. They seemed to like to come around and sit in your room listening to the young bachelors setting each other straight about everything under the sun. Walker never said much; he was inordinately wary about disagreeing with anyone, for all the efforts of some of us to make him see how much we admired him; but he always seemed to be listening with real interest. Janet had a habit of coming quietly into the conversation on the losing side of the argument with some devastating question we had all



## You Never go Back to Sleep

overlooked. She would lean forward in a way that was very characteristic of her, bending from the waist and keeping her shoulders squared and her head back, and look at you out of those marvellous deep blue eyes and appear for a moment to be very intent. But somehow she never got involved in the discussion; it was as if she had really spoken to help the losers and had only made her question so unanswerable in order to make you think she cared as much about the subject as you seemed to.

We were much too shy to try to draw Walker out, and I can't remember anyone's ever publically admitting that he knew Walker was a writer at all, though of course by that time several of us had read his books and discovered that in the last five or six years he had become, almost behind the public's back, a great novelist. The only permanent quality *The Sinister Angel* had had was its energy; the energy was in these later books too, but they had in addition a kind of intense and impersonal responsiveness to the quality of every situation they dealt with which was quite new. It was a curious and fascinating effect, for there was something about the surface play of events in what Walker wrote which at times seemed almost uncertain. It was as if, while he was determined to keep the plots of his novels completely natural, he were learning, like a foreigner, how the little things which made for a general air of naturalness worked. I discovered, when I looked them up, that the reviewers had been completely convinced by this hard-earned effect and had not noticed anything else; they habitually described the novels as 'disappointing'. And yet in fact what made these books was their understanding, not their contrivance. They were invariably right about the feelings where human relations were concerned, with a rightness which haunted you like a recollection from childhood. And how they were written!—it was only the overwhelming rightness of understanding which filled the sentences at every turn that kept them from seeming too self-conscious. They were the full communication of that sleepless life which went on all the time behind Walker's façade of good manners and polite conversation.

I can only remember one occasion on which he really talked to us. We had got into an unusually heated discussion of Malcolm Cowley's *Exile's Return*, which came out about that time, and a couple of our leading Marxists—it was still stylish to be a Marxist then—were giving the Lost Generation a going over. We had

completely forgotten about Walker, who was, as usual, sitting quietly on the couch with Janet. Then suddenly, in one of those pauses when two speakers have interrupted each other and both stop, he spoke up.

'It wasn't quite like that, you know', he said, running his hand through his hair in a way I had learned to recognize as a sign that for the moment he had forgotten his fantastic notion about not knowing how to talk to people any more. 'I mean what you say may be true, but we didn't see ourselves and what we were doing that way at all.' He stopped then and looked at Janet, and I thought he wasn't going to say any more, but she smiled and nodded at him and he looked back at us.

'Look', he said eagerly, 'let me tell you how it was.' He paused a minute to think, as if it were something he couldn't quite remember himself and were going to have to imagine all over again. 'We saw everything we did as symbolic. There must be something in that book of Malcolm's about Faith and Amory Johnson.' We nodded. 'I suppose it all looks pretty silly now, all that fuss over giving dinner parties that were just right and making the Riviera stylish in the summer, but for us there was something enormously important about culture and sensitivity and not being provincial mixed up in it all.' He made a little gesture with his hands as if to apologize for the big words. 'I've never known anything that seemed quite so important. Of course, Amory had a lot to do with it. He had tremendous charm and always used it to make people feel successful, so that every party of his seemed like the final flowering of western civilization.' He hesitated, and I thought again he was going to stop, but after a second or two he looked at us with his eyebrow raised in that way that made you feel he was much more interested in you than in what he was saying, and went on.

'Look', he said again. 'I'll tell you about once when we were on the Riviera. Alec Wharton was leaving for Paris the next day and we all had a feeling this was the beginning of the end—as in fact it turned out to be—because Alec had been close to us for a long time. Amory gave a picnic on the beach and between him and the wine the occasion began to seem very significant to us. We all got to making Alec farewell speeches, half serious and half parodies of stuffed-shirt speeches. I don't suppose they were as funny or as moving as we thought they were. Anyway, just

## You Never go Back to Sleep

about the time Alec should have got up and thanked us, Nora got up instead and said, "These are all very pretty speeches, gentlemen, but they are only words, and what are words?"—actually they were all we had and Nora was the only person there who knew it; I suppose she'd realized for a long time that they weren't very good words—anyway she said, "What's needed here is a gift." And before we could guess what she was doing she had slipped out of her black step-ins and tossed them to Alec.'

He stopped then, and I caught our two Marxists raising their eyebrows at each other stupidly. I suppose Walker saw them too, because the eagerness went out of his voice and he added, as if to make up to us with a final reference to a big name for having bored us with a dull story, 'Alec embarrassed us all terribly by being fussed.'

It was a week or two later that I was in New York and met Alan French, the poet, at a cocktail party. I was still haunted by that story of Walker's and I knew they'd been in college together, so after the third cocktail I began to think it would be a smart idea to ask him about Walker. Fortunately he'd had several drinks himself and didn't seem to mind.

'I haven't seen Walker for four or five years now', he said. 'You know, when Nora went to pieces we all thought he was going to too. He was drunk as hell for a year or two and then suddenly he stopped altogether, and after that you couldn't talk to him; he told jokes and said nice things about the children.'

'And wrote two great books', I said, without stopping to think.

French looked at me hard, and for a minute I thought he was going to take this as a reference to the fact that he hadn't written anything himself, good or bad, for four years. He must have been thinking about it, but he only said, 'They're damned fine, aren't they? I'm glad other people have noticed it.'

It was just after that that I got mixed up in what I thought was a love affair, about which the less said the better, and didn't see anything of Walker or Janet for three or four months. About the time I was getting back to normal, Walker called me up one day.

'You never invited yourself to dinner', he said.

'I never had the courage.'

'Oh,' he said; he sounded genuinely surprised and he probably was. 'Well, I wonder if you'd have dinner with us Friday, at Janet's.'

I said I would, and I suppose it was a sign of my recovery that I reread Walker's newest novel, *The Last Summer*, between then—it was Wednesday—and Friday, in spite of having four sets of hour-tests to get through.

When I arrived Janet was in the kitchen, and Walker came to the door with a cocktail shaker in his hand. I must have looked surprised, because he smiled and said, 'No drunk is ever really reformed until he can drink again.' It was the first time I had ever heard him refer casually to his past. When Janet came in and we drank our cocktails I was fascinated to see what a ceremony he made of drinking the one he apparently allowed himself. It was somehow pathetic, and in a kind of remote way he seemed to see that it was and to try to disparage the feeling. I don't remember what we talked about at dinner now—the usual New Haven gossip, I suppose. After dinner we washed the dishes and then Walker and Janet sat down on the couch and held hands like an undergraduate and his girl. Walker looked at Janet in that way he had, and when she smiled he turned to me.

'Janet says you like my books.'

I managed to mumble something, I don't know what. You just couldn't tell Walker you thought he was the finest writer of his time; he would simply have thought it silly and in bad taste.

'The last two have been all right', he said, as if he were talking about the work of a man he didn't know at all, 'though I wish I could have managed a better ending for *The Last Summer*. I never was really sure, as you could see, what I wanted that book to mean.' He looked at me with that quizzical expression of his which suggested you were some important person he was anxious to make like him, and for a second I felt nearly as intelligent as he seemed to be supposing I was. 'But it wasn't the books I wanted to talk about; I've been making my will.' The idea seemed to embarrass him and he became very solemn. 'Everyone ought to make his will, so that if he gets into an accident, or something, he won't leave his affairs in a mess.' It was absurd the way he sat there holding Janet's hand like a schoolboy and giving me this family-lawyer speech on the well-ordered life. 'I—I wonder if you'd be my executor?' This embarrassed him even more and he hurried on: 'I wanted to dump the thing on Janet, but she thinks that on account of Nora——' And then, astonishingly, he wasn't embarrassed any more at all.

## You Never go Back to Sleep

'Look', he said, 'I might as well tell you about this from the beginning. You know I was married?' He never seemed to remember, except when he'd just been reminded of it, how famous he had been and this was a real question. I nodded. 'Well', he went on, 'my wife, Nora, became an invalid about ten years ago——' I made the mistake of nodding again and for a minute I thought his realization that I knew 'all about it was going to gravel him, but he accepted it and went on. 'Nora's been in a hospital for some time now and it's expensive. I've made a fair amount out of the magazines in these last five years and a little out of the books, but it takes a good deal and besides, I want something for Janet.'

'Now listen, Walker', said Janet leaning forward, but he stopped her by turning and looking at her and she dropped back against the couch and put her free hand over his. He didn't seem to notice.

'You probably know', he said to me, 'the state I was in five years ago. I don't know whether you know what it's like to start your life full of a hell of a belief that you know exactly how things ought to be and that you are a big enough writer to make everyone see it, and then have everyone agree with you right off the bat?' This was a question too, but even he seemed to realize when I didn't nod that perhaps he had been, in some unimportant respects, different from the rest of us. Anyway, he laughed. 'If you're young, it can go to your head, but though you don't suspect it for a while, the worst part is the let-down; at least it was that way with me. Then one day, when I left Nora in the hospital, I suddenly realized that ten years had gone by and that all we'd done in that time, all the things we'd been thinking were so significant, had been just money and waste. I guess Nora had known it for a long time and hadn't seen anything to do about it.

'My first impulse was to get really drunk, and I did; it lasted a couple of years. But all the time I was remembering what fools we'd been and all the stupid and silly things we'd done I kept right on wanting to write; it was like an inheritance. So one day I sobered up and started to try. I've been trying ever since and I really think I've been doing a good deal better lately, don't you?' Again it was a real question, and again I gave up and just nodded.

'Of course, I've had to write a good deal for the magazines

because there were the debts and Nora, but I've always made the stuff as good as I could, and I've taken my time over the novels.' He stopped and looked at something behind me. 'Alan French used to say I had "fatal facility" when we were in college; I wish he could have seen me sweating over those novels. But you wouldn't know Alan.'

'I talked to him a few weeks ago in New York', I said.

'Good Lord', he said, 'did you really? In New York?' He seemed to feel it was out of the question that Alan French should be in any place so actual and contemporary as New York; I really believe all the people he'd known in the old days had died for him when he sobered up. Then, as if there weren't much time, though it was early in the evening, he went back to his will.

'The point is', he said, 'I've got another novel practically finished; it could be printed to-morrow if necessary, but I want to keep working on it as long as I can. But it's in good shape and all typed up'—he seemed to feel this was important, I suppose because he thought it would save trouble—and I expect you might be able to get together a volume of short stories and maybe even a volume of essays. I got all the debts paid three years ago and I've been saving something ever since. I think if you could sell these two or three things for me there'd be enough to take care of Nora and leave something for Janet. I know it's a lot to ask you, but Janet thought maybe you wouldn't mind.' He leaned back and looked at me anxiously.

I tried to think of something to say, but I couldn't, and finally blurted out, 'It would be an honour.'

He looked embarrassed for a minute and then decided to pretend he hadn't heard me at all and turned to Janet as if he thought she'd said something.

It was just a week later, as I was looking for the sports page of the *New York Times*, that I happened to turn up the obituaries and saw that he had died the day before. It was a long time before I could do anything but stare at that detailed and terrible obituary. Its account of Walker dealt almost exclusively with the earlier period of his life, and dealt with it in a tone of smug superiority, as if the people of the 'twenties had not been real people whose lives had consequences but were merely the raw material of a period musical comedy to which, by some grotesque accident, an unhappy but extremely improving ending out of some work

## You Never go Back to Sleep

such as *The London Merchant* had got affixed. The account of the latter part of Walker's life had obviously been got up hastily and was full of inaccuracies: it called his book *Last Summer*, as if it were something by Katharine Brush. That the Walker I had known, who had survived with such pain and cunning to write the final novels, had for the world never really existed came to me with a shock. Absorbed as I had been in watching in him the existence which manifested itself clearly only in his books, I had lost track of the general opinion of him which I had shared till I came to know him. It was like a final defeat for the Walker who had come back from the shambles in which the charmingly childish and ignorant experimenting of the 'twenties had ended to the curious understanding of his last years. I had, for the first time in my life, a stifling feeling that real understanding was never recognized and that the kind of talented flash Walker had shown in the 'twenties was all the truth about experience people would accept. No doubt this is nonsense, but it is a feeling I have never quite been able to shake since, and whenever it comes over me, I have a little the sensation of going under ether.

I called Janet at once, but she was out of town, at the funeral, as she told me later, and it wasn't for another week that I got hold of her and she said I could come over. When I arrived at her apartment she seemed just as always. I was surprised, though I ought not to have been because you never could tell much about what Janet really felt from the way she acted. It was a supreme form of good manners which occasionally led silly people into accusing her of not feeling anything at all. The first thing I asked her was what had happened to Walker; he had seemed perfectly well that night at dinner.

'Oh, didn't you know?' she said; 'it was his heart. The doctors told him five years ago it wouldn't last him more than a year.' She looked down at her hands which were lying quietly in her lap. 'They don't seem to know much about hearts.' Then she looked up again and went on, naturally and confidently, as if she knew I would care, not be just curious, about everything which concerned Walker. 'He was working when he died, in there'—she pointed to her bedroom—'I'd made him move from the Lawn Club so he wouldn't be alone so much. When I went in to get him for lunch he was sitting in the arm-chair as if he'd finished writing. He'd been revising the last chapter of the new book he was telling

you about and this was still in the typewriter.' She reached across to her desk and handed me a sheet of paper. There were only two lines of type. 'It's in the pitch dark that you see the whole truth', Walker had written, 'and once you wake up at that time of night, you never go back to sleep.'

'But I think', Janet said, 'we'd better leave the chapter as it was. You should never say things like that.'

'But, Janet', I said stupidly, 'it's the truth; it's exactly how Walker understood.' I felt as if I had got at the very heart of the mystery.

'Oh, yes', she said; 'it's how anyone who understands does it.'



# CRITICISM

## LITERATURE AS AN INSTITUTION

HARRY LEVIN

### 1. *The Contribution of Taine*

L'ITERATURE is the expression of society, as speech is the expression of man.' In this aphorism the Vicomte de Bonald summed up one of the bitter lessons that the French Revolution had taught the world. With the opening year of the nineteenth century, and the return of the Emigration, coincided a two-volume study by Madame de Staël: *De la Littérature considérée dans ses Rapports avec les Institutions Sociales*. This was not the first time, of course, that some relationship had been glimpsed. Renaissance humanism, fighting out the invidious quarrel between ancient and modern literatures, had concluded that each was the unique creation of its period, and had adumbrated an historical point of view. Romantic nationalism, seeking to undermine the prestige of the neo-classic school and to revive the native traditions of various countries, was now elaborating a series of geographical comparisons. It was left for Hippolyte Taine—in the vanguard of a third intellectual movement, scientific positivism—to formulate a sociological approach. To the historical and geographical factors, the occasional efforts of earlier critics to discuss literature in terms of 'moment' and 'race', he added a third conception, which completed and finally eclipsed them. 'Milieu', as he conceived it, is the link between literary criticism and the social sciences. Thus Taine raised a host of new problems by settling an old one.

When Taine's history of English literature appeared, it smelled—to a contemporary reader, Amiel—like the exhalations from a laboratory. To that sensitive Swiss idealist, it conveyed a whiff of 'the literature of the future in the American style', of 'the death of poetry flayed and anatomized by science'. This 'intrusion of

technology into literature', as Amiel was shrewd enough to observe, is a responsibility which Taine shares with Balzac and Stendhal. As Taine self-consciously remarked: 'From the novel to criticism and from criticism to the novel, the distance at present is not very great.' Taine's critical theory is grounded upon the practice of the realists, while their novels are nothing if not critical. His recognition of the social forces behind literature coincides with their resolution to embody those forces in their works. The first to acknowledge Stendhal as a master, he welcomed Flaubert as a colleague and lived to find Zola among his disciples. 'When M. Taine studies Balzac', Zola acknowledged, 'he does exactly what Balzac himself does when he studies Père Grandet.' There is no better way to bridge the distance between criticism and the novel, or to scrutinize the presuppositions of modern literature, than by a brief reconsideration of Taine's critical method.

A tougher-minded reader than Amiel, Flaubert, noted in 1864 that —whatever the *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise* left unsettled—it got rid of the uncritical notion that books dropped like meteorites from the sky. The social basis of art might thereafter be overlooked, but it could hardly be disputed. Any lingering belief in poetic inspiration could hardly withstand the higher criticism that had disposed of spontaneous generation and was disposing of divine revelation. When Renan, proclaiming his disbelief in mysteries, depicted Jesus as the Son of man and analysed the origins of Christianity, then Taine could depict genius as the outgrowth of environment and analyse the origins of literature. On the whole, though critics have deplored the crudity of his analyses and scholars have challenged the accuracy of his facts, his working hypothesis has won acceptance. He has become the stock example of a rigorous determinist—especially for those who think determinism is a modern version of fatalism. Taine's determinism, however, is simply an intensive application of the intellectual curiosity of his age. It is no philosopher's attempt to encroach upon the freedom of the artist's will; it is simply an historian's consciousness of what the past has already determined.

As for Taine's rigour, a more thoroughgoing historical materialist, George Plekhanov, has gone so far as to accuse him of arrant idealism. A recent artist-philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, describes Taine's empiricism as an unsuccessful effort to set up a realistic system of metaphysics. Actually his position is that of most realists,

## Literature as an Institution

so outrageous to their early readers and so tame to later critics. His method explained too much to satisfy his contemporaries; it has not explained enough to satisfy ours. Confronted with the provocative statement, 'Vice and virtue are products like vitriol and sugar', we are not shocked by the audacity that reduces moral issues to chemical formulae; we are amused at the naiveté that undertakes to solve them both by a single equation. Taine's introduction to his history of English 'literature, which abounds in dogmas of this sort, is rather a manifesto than a methodology. If, reading on, we expect the history to practise what the introduction preaches, we are amiably disappointed. Each successive author is more freely individualized. How does Taine's all-determining scheme meet its severest test? With Shakespeare, he explains, after canvassing the material factors, 'all comes from within—I mean from his soul and his genius; circumstances and externals have contributed but little to his development'.

The loophole that enables Taine to avoid the strict consequences of his three determinants is a fourth—a loose system of psychology. Psychology takes over where sociology has given up, and the sociologist has shown surprisingly little interest in classes or institutions. He has viewed history as a parade of influential individuals, themselves the creatures of historical influences. To understand their achievements is 'a problem in psychological mechanics'. The psychologist must disclose their ruling passions; he must hit upon that magnificent obsession, that 'master faculty' which conditions have created within the soul of every great man. Let us not be put off by the circular logic, the mechanical apparatus, and the scientific jargon: Taine, conscientious child of his temperament and time, was an ardent individualist. His theory of character owes quite as much to Balzac as his theory of environment owes to Stendhal. Had it been the other way around, had he combined Stendhal's psychological insight with Balzac's sociological outlook, he might have been a better critic. His portrait of Balzac, for better or worse, is as monomaniacal as Balzac's portrait of Grandet.

Psychology is a knife, Dostoevsky warns us, which cuts two ways. We may look for a man in his books, or we may look to the man for the explanation of his books. Taine's is the more dangerous way: to deduce the qualities of a work from a presupposition about the author. The whole *Comédie humaine* follows

from the consideration that Balzac was a business man, and Livy's history is what you might expect from a writer who was really an orator. This mode of critical characterization must perforce be limited to a few broad strokes, much too exaggerated and impressionistic to be compared with the detailed nuances of Sainte-Beuve's portraiture. Most of Taine's figures bear a strong family likeness. He is most adroit at bringing out the generic traits of English literature: the response to nature, the Puritan strain, the fact—in short—that it was written by Englishmen. He himself, true to his theories, remains an intransigent Frenchman, and his history—to the point where he abandons Tennyson for Musset and recrosses the Channel—remains a traveller's survey of a foreign culture. Why, in spite of all temptations to interpret other cultures, should Taine have been attracted to England?

Taine's critical faculties were conditioned not by science but by romanticism, and who was Taine to repudiate his own conditioning? Madame de Staël had been drawn to Germany, and Melchior de Vogué would soon be seeking the Russian soul, but English was for most Frenchmen the typically romantic literature. France had been the Bastille of classicism, while Britain had never been enslaved to the rules; untamed nature, in Saxon garb, resisted the shackles of Norman constraint. It took very little perception of the technique of English poetry for Taine to prefer blank verse to Alexandrines. Form, as he construed it, was a body of artificial restrictions which inhibited free expression, and which English men of letters had somehow succeeded in doing without. One might almost say that they had developed a literature of pure content. 'Not in Greece, nor in Italy, nor in Spain, nor in France', said Taine, 'has an art been seen which tried so boldly to express the soul and the most intimate depths of the soul, the reality and the whole reality.' What seemed to him so unprecedented is, on closer scrutiny, a complex tradition. Elizabethan drama is so much more baroque than the succinct tragedies of Racine that Taine missed its pattern altogether, and believed he was facing a chaos of first-hand and unconstrained realities. His impressions were those of Fielding's barber Partridge at the play, wholly taken in by theatrical make-believe, naïvely mistaking the actors for the characters they represent, quixotically confusing literature with life.

### 2. Sociological Criticism and Social Critics

Remembering Lamb's essay on the artificiality of Restoration comedy, we cannot share Taine's facile assumption that the English stage received and retained 'the exact imprint of the century and the nation'. We cannot accept this 'free translation of Hamlet's impulse to give 'the very age and body of the time his form and pressure'. We can admit that Taine was less of a critic than an historian, but we cannot forgive him for being such an uncritical historian. His professed willingness to trade quantities of charters for the letters of Saint Paul or the memoirs of Cellini does not indicate a literary taste; it merely states a preference for human documents as against constitutional documents. In exploiting literature for purposes of historical documentation, Taine uncovered a new mine of priceless source material. But he never learned the difference between ore and craftsmanship. In his *Philosophie de l'art*, to be sure, he could no longer sidestep aesthetic and technical discussion. He was forced to concede that art could be idealistic as well as realistic, and to place Greek sculpture at a farther remove from reality than Flemish painting. This concession allowed him to turn his back on the sculpture, and to reconstruct, with a freer hand than ever, the moment, the race, and the milieu of ancient Greece.

The serious objection to environmentalism is that it failed to distinguish, not between one personality and another, but between personality and art. It encouraged scholars to write literary histories which, as Ferdinand Brunetière pointed out, were nothing but chronological dictionaries of literary biography. It discouraged the realization, which Brunetière called the evolution of *genres*, that literary technique had a history of its own. It advanced a brilliant generalization, and established—as first-rate ideas will do in second-rate minds—a rule of thumb. The incidental and qualified extent to which books epitomize their epoch may vary from one example to the next. Taine's successors made no allowances for the permutations of form; rather they industrialized his process for extracting the contents of the books. The prevailing aim of literary historiography, under the sponsorship of Gustave Lanson in France and other professors elsewhere, has been a kind of illustrated supplement to history. Academic research has con-

centrated so heavily on the backgrounds of literature that the foreground has been almost obliterated.

Meanwhile Taine's influence has been felt in the wider areas of criticism, and here it has been subordinated to political ends. Taine himself was bitterly anti-political. He did not realize the importance of ideas until he had lost faith in his own: originally he had been a proponent of the doctrines of the *philosophes*, which he blamed in his later studies, *Les Origines de la France Contemporaine*, for instigating the Revolution of 1789. It was a Danish critic, closely associated with Ibsen, Nietzsche, and the controversies of the eighties, who broadened the range and narrowed the tendency of literary history. For politics, and for literature too, Georg Brandes had more feeling than Taine. A cosmopolitan liberal, deeply suspicious of the ascendancy of Prussia, he found a touchstone for the romanticists in their struggles or compromises with clerical reaction and the authority of the state. Byron and Heine were his urbane prophets, the Schlegels were renegades, and the revolution of 1848 was the anticlimax toward which his *Main Currents of Nineteenth Century Literature* moved. Where a book had been an end-product to Taine, to Brandes it was a continuing force, and the critic's added function was to chart its repercussions.

Both aspects have been duly stressed in the critical interpretation of American writers—their reactions to their environment and their contributions to the liberal tradition. Our foremost literary historian, V. L. Parrington, extended and modified Taine's formula to fit our problems, dramatizing New England Puritanism from the standpoint of western populism, and pitting a heroic Jefferson against a sinister Hamilton. His title, *Main Currents in American Thought*, conveyed a fraternal salute to Brandes, and denoted an additional qualification. Parrington got around Taine's difficulty—the difficulty of using imaginative writers as historical sources—by drawing upon the moralists and the publicists. His chapters on Roger Williams and John Marshall are ample and rewarding; his accounts of Poe and Henry James are so trivial that they might better have been omitted. The latest period is inevitably the hardest, and his last volume is posthumous and fragmentary, but it seems to mark an increasing conflict between artistic and political standards. Granville Hicks, going over the same ground, was able to resolve that conflict by the simple device of discarding artistic standards.

## Literature as an Institution

Mr Hicks, if he still adheres to his somewhat elusive conception of *The Great Tradition*, is a Marxist critic in the sense that Parrington was a Jeffersonian critic. The choice between them is largely a matter of political standards. Jeffersonianism, naturally the most favourable climate in which to discuss American literature, has been taken in vain so often that it has begun to resist definition. Marxism, by redefining milieu in economic terms, has presented a more rigorous theory of historical causation than Taine's and a more ruthless canon of political allegiance than Brandes'. It has introduced criticism to a sociological system which is highly illuminating and a social doctrine which is highly controversial. It has tightened the relations between literature and life by oversimplifying them beyond recognition. In this respect Karl Marx, as he occasionally confessed, was no Marxist: he repeatedly cautioned his followers against expecting the arts to show a neat conformity with his views. Perhaps if he had written his projected study of Balzac, he would have bequeathed them a critical method. For lack of one, they took what was available. Marxist criticism superimposed its socialistic doctrine on the deterministic method, and judged according to Marx what it had interpreted according to Taine.

Extension and modification have added their corollary to Taine's method: the relations between literature and society are reciprocal. Literature is not only the effect of social causes; it is also the cause of social effects. The critic may investigate its causes, as Taine tried to do; or he may, like Brandes and others, be more interested in its effects. So long as he is correlating works of art with trends of history, his function is relatively clear. It becomes less clear as he encounters his contemporaries, and as the issues become more immediate. He is then concerned, no longer with a secure past, but with a problematic future. An insecure present may commit him to some special partisanship, Marxist or otherwise, and incline him to judge each new work by its possible effect—whether it will advance or hinder his party's programme. Since art can be a weapon, among other things, it will be judged in the heat of the battle by its polemical possibilities. We need not deny the relevance or significance of such judgments; we need only recognize that they carry us beyond the limits of aesthetic questions into the field of moral values. There are times when criticism cannot conveniently stop at the border. Whenever there are boundary

disputes, questions involving propaganda or regulation, we may be called upon to go afield. We shall be safe while we are aware that virtue and beauty are as intimately related as beauty and truth, and as eternally distinct.

### 3. *The Rôle of Convention*

It was as if Taine had discovered that the earth was round, without realizing that another continent lay between Europe and Asia. The distance was longer, the route more devious, than sociological criticism had anticipated. Not that the intervening territory was unexplored; but those who had explored it most thoroughly were isolationists. Those who were most familiar with the techniques and traditions of literature were least conscious of its social responsibilities. Most of them were writers themselves, lacking in critical method perhaps, yet possessing the very skills and insights that the methodologists lacked. A few were philosophers, striving—on the high plane of idealism—toward an historical synthesis of the arts. Their concept of expressive form, inherited by the aesthetic of Croce from the literary history of Francesco de Sanctis, resembles the 'organic principle' that Anglo-American criticism inherits from the theory of Coleridge, the preaching of Emerson, and the practice of Thoreau. By whichever name, it is too sensitive an instrument to be used effectively, except by acute critics on acknowledged masterpieces. With cruder material, in unskilled hands, its insistence on the uniqueness of each work of art and its acceptance of the artist at his own evaluation dissolve into aesthetic impressionism and romantic hero-worship.

While this school is responsible for many admirable critiques, it has never produced that 'new criticism' which the late J. E. Spingarn tried vainly to define. Conceiving art as the fullest expression of individuality, it has disregarded the more analytic approaches. Taine's school, though less discriminating, has been more influential, because it conceives art as a collective expression of society. The fallacy in this conception—we have already seen—is to equate art with society, to assume a one-to-one correspondence between a book and its subject-matter, to accept the literature of an age as a complete and exact replica of the age itself. One way or another, literature is bound to tell the truth; but it has told the whole truth very seldom, and nothing but the truth



## Literature as an Institution

hardly ever; some things are bound to be left out, and others to be exaggerated in the telling. Sins of omission can usually be traced to some restriction in the artist's freedom of speech, his range of experience, or his control of his medium. Sins of commission are inherent in the nature of his materials. The literary historian must reckon with these changing degrees of restriction and exaggeration. Literary history, if it is to be accurate, must be always correcting its aim.

To mention one conspicuous case, the relations between the sexes have received a vast—possibly a disproportionate—amount of attention from writers. From their miscellaneous and contradictory testimony it would be rash to infer very much, without allowing for the artistic taboos of one period or the exhibitionism of another. An enterprising sociologist, by measuring the exposed portions of the human figure in various paintings, has arrived at a quantitative historical index of comparative sensuality. What inference could not be drawn, by some future sciolist, from the preponderance of detective stories on the shelves of our circulating libraries? Those volumes testify, for us, to the colourless comfort of their readers' lives. We are aware, because we are not dependent on literary evidence, that ours is no unparalleled epoch of domestic crime—of utterly ineffectual police, of criminals who bear all the earmarks of innocence, and of detectives whose nonchalance is only equalled by their erudition. These, we are smugly aware, have not much more significance than the counters of a complicated game. Nevertheless, it is disturbing to imagine what literal-minded critics may deduce when the rules of the game have been forgotten. It suggests that we ourselves may be misreading other books through our ignorance of the lost conventions on which they hinge.

Convention may be described as a necessary difference between art and life. Some differences, strictly speaking, may be quite unnecessary: deliberate sallies of the imagination, unconscious effects of miscalculation or misunderstanding. But art must also differ from life for technical reasons: limitations of form, difficulties of expression. The artist, powerless to overcome these obstacles by himself, must have the assistance of his audience. They must agree to take certain formalities and assumptions for granted, to take the word for the deed or the shading for the shadow. The result of their unspoken agreement is a compromise

between the possibilities of life and the exigencies of art. Goethe might have been speaking of convention when he said, '*In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister*'. Limitation has often been a source of new forms, and difficulty—as the defenders of rhyme have argued, from Samuel Daniel to Paul Valéry—has prompted poets to their most felicitous expressions. Without some sort of conventionalization art could hardly exist. It exists by making virtues of necessities; after the necessities disappear, we forget the conventions. After perspective is invented, we misjudge the primitives; after scenery is set up, we challenge the unities. And Taine, forgetting that feminine rôles were played by boys, is appalled at finding masculine traits in Elizabethan heroines.

His former classmate, Francisque Sarcey, who became—through forty years of playgoing—the most practical of critics, might have supplied the needed correction for Taine's theories. 'It is inadequate to repeat that the theatre is a representation of human life', Sarcey had learned. 'It would be a more precise definition to say that dramatic art is the sum of conventions, universal or local, eternal or temporary, which help—when human life is represented on the stage—to give a public the illusion of truth.' This illusion may be sustained in the novel more easily than on the stage; but it is still an illusion, as Maupassant frankly admitted. Although drama may be the most conventional of literary forms, and fiction the least, even fiction is not entirely free. Even Proust, the most unconventional of novelists, must resort to the convention of eavesdropping in order to sustain the needs of first-person narrative. We need not condone such melodramatic stratagems; we can observe that the modern novel has endeavoured to get along without them; upon fuller consideration we may even conclude that the whole modern movement of realism, technically considered, is an endeavour to emancipate literature from the sway of conventions.

#### 4. *Toward an Institutional Method*

This provisional conclusion would explain why literary historians, under the influence of realism, have slighted literary form. In their impatience to lay bare the so-called content of a work, they have missed a more revealing characteristic: the way the artist handles the appropriate conventions. Whether it is possible,

## Literature as an Institution

or even desirable, to eliminate artifice from art—that is one of the largest questions that criticism must face. But realistic novelists who declare their intentions of transcribing life have an obvious advantage over realistic critics who expect every book to be a literal transcript. Stendhal, when he declares that ‘a novel is a mirror riding along a highway’, is in a position to fulfil his picaresque intention. When Taine echoes this precept, defining the novel as ‘a kind of portable mirror which can be conveyed everywhere, and which is most convenient for reflecting all aspects of nature and life’, he puts the mirror before the horse. He is then embarrassed to discover so few reflections of the *ancien régime* in French novels of the eighteenth century. His revulsion from neo-classical generalities and his preference for descriptive details carry him back across the channel, from Marmontel and Crébillon *fils* to Fielding and Smollett. Some mirrors, Taine finally discovered, are less reliable than others.

The metaphor of the mirror held up to nature, the idea that literature reflects life, was mentioned by Plato only to be rejected. By the time of Cicero it was already a commonplace of criticism. It was applied by the ancients to comedy, the original vehicle of realism; later it became a byword for artistic didacticism, for the medieval zeal to see vice exposed and virtue emulated. When Shakespeare invoked it, he had a definite purpose which those who quote him commonly ignore. Hamlet is not merely describing a play, he is exhorting the players. His advice is a critique of bad acting as well as an apology for the theatre, a protest against unnatural conventions as well as a plea for realism. Like modern critics who derive their metaphors from photography, he implies a further comparison with more conventionalized modes of art—particularly with painting. To hold up a photograph or a mirror, as it were, is to compare the ‘abstract and brief chronicles of the time’ with the distorted journeywork that ‘imitated humanity so abominably’. Art should be a reflection of life, we are advised, not a distortion—as it has all too frequently been. Criticism, in assuming that art invariably reflects and forgetting that it frequently distorts, wafts us through the looking-glass into a sphere of its own, where everything is clear and cool, logical and literal, and more surrealistic than real.

In questioning the attempts of scholars to utilize Shakespeare as the mirror of his time, Professor Stoll has reminded them that

their business is to separate historical fact from literary illusion, to distinguish the object from its reflected image. Literature, instead of reflecting life, refracts it. Our task, in any given case, is to determine the angle of refraction. Since the angle depends upon the density of the medium, it is always shifting, and the task is never easy. We are aided to-day, however, by a more flexible and accurate kind of critical apparatus than Taine was able to employ. An acquaintance with artistic conventions, which can best be acquired through comparative studies in technique, should complement an awareness of social backgrounds. 'Literature is complementary to life.' This formula of Lanson's is broad enough to include the important proviso that there is room in the world of art for ideals and projects, fantasies and anxieties, which do not ordinarily find a habitation in the world of reality. But, in recognizing that literature adds something to life or that it subtracts something from life, we must not overlook the most important consideration of all—that literature is at all times an intrinsic part of life. It is, if we can work out the implications of Leslie Stephen's phrase, 'a particular function of the whole social organism'.

The organic character of this relationship has been most explicitly formulated by a statesman and historian, Prosper de Barante. Writing of the ideas behind the French Revolution while they were still fresh in men's minds, his comprehension of their political interplay was broader than Taine's. 'In the absence of regular institutions', wrote Barante, 'literature became one.' The truth, though it has long been obscured by a welter of personalities and technicalities, is that literature has always been an institution. Like other institutions, the church or the law, it cherishes a unique phase of human experience and controls a special body of precedents and devices; it tends to incorporate a self-perpetuating discipline, while responding to the main currents of each succeeding period; it is continually accessible to all the impulses of life at large, but it must translate them into its own terms and adapt them to its peculiar forms. Once we have grasped this fact, we begin to perceive how art may belong to society and yet be autonomous within its own limits, and are no longer puzzled by the apparent polarity of social and formal criticism. These, in the last analysis, are complementary frames of reference whereby we may discriminate the complexities of a work of art. In multiplying

## Literature as an Institution

these discriminations between external impulses and internal peculiarities—in other words, between the effects of environment and convention—our ultimate justification is to understand the vital process to which they are both indispensable.

To consider the novel as an institution, then, imposes no dogma, exacts no sacrifice, and excludes none of the critical methods that have proved illuminating in the past. If it tends to subordinate the writer's personality to his achievement, it requires no further apology, for criticism has long been unduly subordinated to biography. The tendency of the romanticists to live their writings and write their lives, and the consequent success of their critics as biographers, did much to justify this subordination; but even Sainte-Beuve's 'natural history of souls', though it unified and clarified an author's works by fitting them into the pattern of his career, was too ready to dismiss their purely artistic qualities as 'rhetoric'. More recently the doctrines of Freud, while imposing a top-heavy vocabulary upon the discussion of art, have been used to corroborate and systematize the sporadic intuitions of artists; but the psychologists, like the sociologists, have been more interested in utilizing books for documentary purposes than in exploring their intrinsic nature. Meanwhile, on the popular level, the confusion between a novelist and his novels has been consciously exploited. A series of novelized biographies, calling itself *Le Roman des Grandes Existences*, invites the common reader to proceed from 'the prodigious life of Balzac' through 'the mournful life of Baudelaire' to 'the wise and merry life of Montaigne'.

If fiction has seldom been discussed on a plane commensurate with its achievements, it is because we are too often sidetracked by personalities. If, with Henry James, we recognize the novelist's intention as a figure in a carpet, we must recognize that he is guided by his material, his training, his commission, by the size and shape of his loom, and by his imagination to the extent that it accepts and masters those elements. Psychology—illuminating as it has been—has treated literature too often as a record of personal idiosyncrasies, too seldom as the basis of a collective consciousness. Yet it is on that basis that the greatest writers have functioned. Their originality has been an ability to 'seize on the public mind', in Bagehot's opinion; conventions have changed and styles have developed as lesser writers caught 'the traditional rhythm of an age'. The irreducible element of individual talent

would seem to play the same rôle in the evolution of *genres* that natural selection plays in the origin of species. Amid the mutations of modern individualism, we may very conceivably have overstressed the private aspects of writing. One convenience of the institutional method is that it gives due credit to the never-ending collaboration between writer and public. It sees no reason to ignore what is relevant in the psychological prepossessions of the craftsman, and it knows that he is ultimately to be judged by the technical resources of his craftsmanship; but it attains its clearest and most comprehensive scope by centring on his craft—on his social status and his historical function as participant in a skilled group and a living tradition.

When Edgar Quinet announced a course at the Collège de France in *La Littérature et les Institutions Comparées de l'Europe Méridionale*, he was requested by Guizot's ministry to omit the word 'institutions' and to limit himself to purely literary discussion. When he replied that this would be impossible, his course was suspended, and his further efforts went directly into those reform agitations which culminated in the democratic revolution of the following year, 1848. Thereby proceeding from sociological to social criticism, he demonstrated anew what French critics and novelists have understood particularly well—the dynamic interaction between ideas and events. In a time which has seen that demonstration repeated on so vast a scale, the institutional forces that impinge upon literature are self-evident. The responsibilities that literature owes to itself, and the special allegiance it exacts from us, should also become apparent when we conceive it as an institution in its own right. The misleading dichotomy between substance and form, which permits literary historians, like Perrington, to dismiss 'belletristic philandering', and aesthetic impressionists, like Mr R. P. Blackmur, to dispose of 'separable content', should disappear as soon as abstract categories are dropped and concrete relations are taken up. And the jurisdictional conflict between truth and beauty should dissolve when aesthetics discovers the truth about beauty; when criticism becomes—as Bacon intended, and Renan and Sainte-Beuve remembered, and all too many other critics have forgotten—the science of art.

## THE LITERARY SITUATION IN AMERICA<sup>1</sup>

ANDREWS WANNING

'AMERICA is a museum of pre-war living', says a friend of mine who has just returned after living through the war years in Paris. This is perhaps as accurate a nutshell summary of the general tone of life here as one could hit on. She was speaking primarily, of course, of the material standard of living, but it would also be true in great part to say that America is a museum of pre-war thinking. As a people, we have been impressed at the surface of our brains by the awful potentialities of the atom bomb, the need for the subordination of nationalism; but underneath, the old visceral antagonisms are coming back: anti-British, anti-Russian, anti-foreign generally. Probably alone of the world's peoples, Americans are on the whole more conservative than before the war, though not as much so as the performances in Congress would make you believe. But enough; collectively we are still perfectly willing to submit to what is called 'free enterprise', provided only that there be certain guarantees of bread and circuses.

The circuses, it may be said, have rarely been bigger and gaudier, and never better attended. Tiny halls and the biggest stadia are bulging. Any sort of a performance, from a baseball game to a symphony concert, is a sell-out. \$4,000,000 epics from Hollywood are commonplace, and most of them earn \$4,000,000 more for the companies who make them. The problem along Broadway is not to get a show, but to get a theatre to put it in.

The quality is something else again. While pre-war baseball is said to be back, even the Drama Critics' Circle, which is made up of the professional New York newspaper critics, has been reluctant for some years to pick anything for its annual award of the best play of the season. Plays with any pretence at seriousness have generally alternated between somewhat archly imaginative

<sup>1</sup> Printing difficulties have made it impossible to keep semi-topical articles of this kind up to date. At the same time it would be regrettable if such essays were dismissed merely because the facts in them are a year old. We have embodied supplementary information in footnotes, but we hope that our readers will be interested in the article's thesis rather than in its data.

whimsy and earnestly insistent good works. On the whole, Broadway continues to do best its musical comedies and reviews. In spite of sensitive wails from some intellectuals, some of these shows have had real gaiety and vitality, and often charming music and considerable visual beauty and style.

Certainly the great bulk of what comes out of the printing mills nowadays belongs to the category of circuses. Publishing, formerly a reasonably mild and leisurely trade, has now become big business, and all sorts of alarming deals and combines are turning up in the financial pages. The biggest bonanza has been the book clubs: there are now said to be 3,500,000 book-club members in the country, and the happy backers confidently predict 5,000,000 within the year and 10,000,000 fairly shortly. Since the book clubs naturally pick for present distribution what has pleased their public in the past, certain dynasties of literary types are set up. We are now enjoying a double reign: the historical novel, preferably set in a period with a reputation for raffishness, like the Restoration in England; and the religious epic, preferably equipped with at least one Magdalene.

One boon to the reader, however, has come out of this enormous increase in publishing activity. Before the war we had no cheap books; now three or four competing companies put out 25 cent books comparable to the English *Penguins* or the pre-war continental *Tauchnitzes*. Their principal offerings are thrillers and romances, and their lists are certainly by no means as broad and as solid as the *Penguins* and *Tauchnitzes*. Nevertheless they have republished a great many of the best American novels of the twenties and thirties, along with representative collections of plays, short stories, and poetry. Since a standard first printing is somewhere in the neighbourhood of 150,000, the possible public for good writing must be larger than has often been thought.

On the other hand it is important to remember that the people with whom these figures deal are the middlebrows. Nobody who is contemplating American culture as a whole should forget that there are realms below. Probably three-quarters of the American public never read a book after they escape from school; their subsequent literary experience consists almost entirely of soap-opera serials on the radio, newspapers with an occasional magazine, and—an underestimated category—the misnamed comic-strip collections. Any statistics on their distribution are somewhat sub-



## Literature as an Institution

terranean, but a special survey has estimated that some 40,000,000 are sold monthly—and this, it seems to me, is one of the most absorbing figures about American culture.

At any rate, the standards appropriate for most of recent publications are clearly statistical. There have not been many books worthy of qualitative standards, and there have not been many readers anxious to use them. If there have been any unmistakable masterpieces I do not know of them. The times have been little better for writing here than in England; the physical pressures have been less, but the difficulties for honesty cannot have been much lighter. As in England, most of the younger writers have been in the services, and the older ones have worked against the strains of individual confusion and unofficial public censorship. Perhaps it isn't surprising that there have been no masterpieces.

Nevertheless, there has been a good deal of talent loose, and in prose an altogether disproportionate amount of it comes from the South. The South has in a variety of curious ways the same relation to the rest of the country that Ireland has to England: it is still predominantly agricultural and belatedly feudal; its sentiments, torn by historical animosities, are irremediably nostalgic even in self-condemnation. Furthermore, even mediocre Southern writers seem to be endowed with a talent for sensuous description and colourful living dialogue, and often in addition for the delineation of odd characters. At least by comparison with the drabness of most of the exhibits, these talents have given to Southern fiction a conspicuous vitality.

Katherine Anne Porter and William Faulkner appear to continue as the divergent models for the younger writers. Eudora Welty is remarkably like Katherine Anne Porter, though somewhat sweeter: exquisite in the articulation of a style apparently conventional, subtle in the discrimination of sensibility, owing her drama largely to new recognitions cast within a pattern of slow growth amid social conformities. Miss Welty, however, is milder than Miss Porter, and your attitude toward a novel like *Delta Wedding* will probably depend in part on your taste for the tenderness with which she regards the big houses and their human appurtenances. Robert Penn Warren, on the other hand, is more like Faulkner (though his milieu is more the social anomalies of the Southern cities): both his pattern and his style are experimental,

his plots owe much to violence, and his characters are singularly fated by compulsions they sometimes understand but can rarely resist.<sup>1</sup> Carson McCullers would be somewhere in between: like Welty and Porter she is concerned chiefly with internal experience but the crises of internal experience have a way of developing through external violence. Faulkner himself, incidentally, has published little lately (in common with most of our recognized writers); his last book was a collection of short stories called *Go Down, Moses*, published in 1942 but largely written considerably earlier. However, there has appeared recently a *Portable Faulkner* (one of a useful series) ingeniously edited by Malcolm Cowley, a compendium which offers some measure of the thoroughness of his imaginative creation of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, and a variety of insights into his intricate legend (as Cowley calls it) of Southern social history.

Among those not gifted with this peculiar birthright, I should like to mention (perhaps arbitrarily) two. One of them is Marguerite Young, a poetess whose most remarkable work so far is a prose book somewhat evasive of categories: she herself calls it *Angel in the Forest: A Fairy Tale of Two Utopias*. Ostensibly social history, it is also a metaphysical allegory of the dream and the reality. Its style, though perhaps overgiven to whimsical juxtaposition, has at least considerable personality. So too has Jean Stafford's, whose *Boston Adventure*, though far from perfect as a whole novel, shows both in style and in many of its scenes what is rare enough, an individual sensibility. What is so far her only novel is probably more successful in its texture than in its total effect: the framework is elastic and much of the plot seems contrived for sensation. But the sensibility behind it is an original domestication of Proust's multiple implications of perception combined with a sense of the macabre more like Poe's. Her future novels are, anyway, worth looking out for.<sup>2</sup>

The younger poets deserve more space than I have; but I understand Mr Daiches is discussing them in this issue, so that no extended remarks will be needed from me.<sup>3</sup> But I should like to make at least a brief comment: it would be to distort the literary

<sup>1</sup> Warren's latest novel *All the King's Men* was awarded the Pulitzer prize. The critical controversy that has centred around it has been ably discussed by Robert Heilman (*The Sewanee Review*, Winter 1947).

<sup>2</sup> Her second novel *The Mountain Lion* has recently been issued.

<sup>3</sup> Mr Daiches' article has been unavoidably postponed to the next issue of *Focus* [Ed.].

## The Literary Situation in America

picture of America not to mention at all the form in which probably the most promising work has been done during the war.

The vice of most American poetry during the thirties was the lack of any decisive personal individuality. This was not true of the poets who appeared in the twenties: Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Cummings, and MacLeish (to name only four) had a sufficiently wide variety of style. But with the thirties the newer poets adopted in matter a kind of *weltschmerz*, occasionally political but more often abstract, and in manner the hardwrought line over which loomed Auden's intricate paradoxes and his alternation of colloquialism and learning. Even the Southerners appeared to lose their regional flavour when devoting themselves to what appeared to be the lowering abstractions of poetry. In any case, though some good poems were written, it was pretty difficult to tell A's from B's.

This may have been in part the price the young poet pays for his isolation from the commercial millions. The audience of the poet in America, which is the intellectual's audience too, is frighteningly small. The three leading literary magazines now are *The Partisan Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Sewanee Review*, with *Accent* perhaps a fourth contender. I doubt if they have together more than 10,000 *different* subscribers; and both subscribers and contributors are remarkably interchangeable. I am not one of those who know what to do about this situation; but I think one of its dangers is that the young writer, if he has an individual talent, may be too much encouraged to regard as the alternative to commercial formula the manners and patterns which are the etiquette of a remarkably interwoven group.

Perhaps the war and its forced new contacts have helped the poets who have been writing during it to break out from this accustomed circle. At any rate what seems to me most notable and encouraging about much recent poetry has been precisely its evident variety of genuine personal style. Instance, Robert Lowell,<sup>1</sup> whose profound sense of original sin, whether inherited from his Puritan forbears or acquired with his adopted Catholicism, has naturalized in his style the striking collision of sacred and profane, liturgical and colloquial (he would perhaps remind you of an orthodox and more controlled Dylan Thomas). In-

<sup>1</sup> Also a Pulitzer prize winner with his second book of poems, *Lord Weary's Castle*.

stance, Karl Shapiro, perhaps the most talented of all in sheer technique, whose gusto for the sensuous phrase and capacity for the bravura image distinguish even unextraordinary thoughts. Instance, Randall Jarrell, who, though uneven, has written what are for me the most moving of any American war poems I have read, and whose bitter feeling for humanity caught in the mechanism of the State and its agent war has given to his style, at its best, the weighted intensity of simple words. These three seem to me the most remarkable; but any longer report should consider too Delmore Schwartz, Robert Penn Warren, and perhaps John Malcolm Brinnin.<sup>1</sup>

None of this is intended to give you the impression that we have had a large literary renaissance in America, though I think the situation looks less drab than it did a year ago. However, in the somewhat limited circles that attend to these matters there has probably been more excitement over a number of recent controversies than over any new creative works in themselves. These controversies, if we set aside the inessential semantic disputes they have bred, are certainly part of what is a clearly perceptible drift in the general temper of literary America. Any such change in thinking—or feeling—is worth noticing; my apology for a fumbling effort at describing it is that this one underlies a good many of the attitudes behind our present writing.

There has been, however, a continuity in the change that goes back to the twenties. I should not venture to remind you of this background to a background if it had not been so persistently misinterpreted of late. But since the writers of the twenties have been successively attacked, not without *mea culpa*, by Archibald MacLeish, Van Wyck Brooks, Howard Mumford Jones, Bernard de Voto and others, as ignoble, pessimistic, nagativistic, and destructive to American ideals, it seems necessary to insist that they were at heart engaged in a humanistic defence of not impossible humanity against the stiffening conformities of machine life, of the cities, of large impersonal organizations, of the morality inherent in the faith that money is the measure of all. In the twenties there was little coherent theory either political or ethical behind these defences; they came from individual feeling and a

<sup>1</sup> The poetic event of the year was certainly the publishing of the first book of William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, which has won him general recognition as one of the foremost of living American poets. Randall Jarrell's discussion of the poem (*Partisan Review*, Sept.-Oct. 1946) is about the most adequate review of it so far.

## Literature as an Institution

sense of smell. But in the thirties, what with the coming of the depression and a fairly articulate direction to American political life, it became easy to see in finance capitalism the particular agent of the machine life, the city, the impersonal organization, and the money faith. The humanism did not exactly alter, but it particularized its enemy politically. The results were apparent both in the political activity of writers, and more significantly, in their writings. Hemingway discovered that no man is an island; Steinbeck, whose early novels had been a queer cult of earthiness, devoted his considerable dexterity to such urgent political messages as *Of Dubious Battle* and *The Grapes of Wrath*; Farrell performed his exhausting but conclusive demonstration of the guilt of environment. The younger poets in particular imitated, without total success, the direction most spectacularly set by Auden and Spender in England.

But with the coming on of war, a number of ironies began to emerge out of this position. Archibald MacLeish, who had a little earlier been one of the most urgent advocates of political speech in poetry, and probably also one of its most successful practitioners, became so impressed with the social power of literature that he attacked a considerable entry of American writers for undermining the younger generation's faith in our ideals and institutions, and so our power to defend ourselves. Mr MacLeish was widely attacked in turn, but not for what turned out to be the real fallacy in his argument. Every observer of our troops reported that they had, with the exception of isolated units, no conception of fighting for ideals at all; nevertheless they fought not unsuccessfully. It became fairly easy to doubt whether power was in any need of a literary alliance.

The scepticisms induced by the war went considerably further. We have probably never had a war so extensively reported and so little rationalized. Even the editors of *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, who chided the army for not explaining to the troops that they were engaged in an anti-fascist crusade, must have been embarrassed in the midst of their righteousness: it was so patent that we were fighting Germany and Japan not because their governments were totalitarian but because they threatened our power position. Yet even among writers and intellectuals there was little active opposition to the war. Apparently there were fewer last-ditch conscientious objectors here than in England;

among writers, Robert Lowell is about the only one I can think of. But assent without approval induces a strained mind; and the result has been wider than a distrust of patriotic virtue. The obverse of the doubt as to whether power needs any spiritual bulwark is the doubt as to whether power can force any spiritual end. The leftist novel of the thirties had at its core a comparatively simple faith that our iniquities lay with the distribution of material goods; that human happiness might be won by an intelligent use of the power of the many to redistribute those goods. At the root of the present uncertainties of American thinking is the doubt as to whether any use of power alone can lead to anything but a different iniquity.

These motivations are speculative; no doubt too it is easier to believe that man cannot live by bread alone at a time when the bread is abundant and cake considerably more than sufficient (as it is now). In any case the clearest evidence of the change about which I have been talking is that American writing, and the interest in it, is only rarely now visibly political at all. This is not to say that the writers are joining the Republicans in any great numbers, or yearning for a return to Coolidge, as do many of our unacknowledged legislators among the National Association of Manufacturers. It is simply harder to detect from their work that they conceive the encouragement of political attitudes as part of their function.

It is also hard to detect any encouragement of political attitudes in the novelists whose republication has distinguished the wartime lists. Of these the chief has been Henry James, but there have also been mild flurries in F. Scott Fitzgerald and E. M. Forster (if I may name an Englishman).<sup>1</sup> There have been various occasions behind these revivals: the boom in James owed something to his centennial in 1943, the critical soul-searching of Fitzgerald was stimulated by the publication of a group of fascinating autobiographical papers called *The Crack-up*, and the reprinting of Forster's books followed an able critical life by Lionel Trilling. But the interest in them has been more than occasional, and the critical discussion has not been merely the official hush of post-

<sup>1</sup> One should add a growing interest in Kafka, as a result of which several of his stories were translated in little reviews, an issue of the *Quarterly Review of Literature* (Vol. II, no. iii) devoted entirely to his work, and a miscellany brought out on him by the Twice a Year Press. 1947 has seen the publication of a comprehensive anthology of criticism, *The Kafka Problem*, and a study (*Kafka's Prayer*) by Paul Goodman.

## The Literary Situation in America

mortem. The obvious thing that they have in common is that they deal chiefly with the leisured classes. Perhaps the sudden enthusiasm for them is in part a boredom with the novel of environment, the novel that traps its characters within the limits of social pressures and impels them with the uniform and predictable drives of sex and greed. James in particular, and the others in part, used leisure to conduct the characters to a moral dilemma whose solutions were based on motivations less uniform and more conscious and intellectual. Or one might speculate about the fascination of the rôle of the observer who, like Strether in *The Ambassadors* or the narrator in *The Great Gatsby*, is outside the main action yet finds himself more or less unwillingly involved in the moral dilemma. There is something about the situation of the observer remarkably suggestive of the writer's own position in the world to-day.

But the alternative to social consciousness has been widely announced to be not merely moral virtuosity, but a religious revival. There is at least plenty of evidence for the public acceptability of piety. On the popular level one can recall the enormous currency of such religious epics as *The Robe*, *The Keys of the Kingdom*, and *David The King*, and such homely Hollywood tracts as *The Song of Bernadette*, *Going My Way*, and *The Bells of St. Mary's*. On a somewhat higher level there has been considerable attention paid to a group of novels (mostly English by birth) which succeed in combining old-fashioned or new-fangled whoring with a note of religious message: Maugham's *The Razor's Edge*, Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop*, and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (which has been popular enough to induce the revival of his other, pre-religious books). The intellectual reviews have been pretty busy with commentary induced by such philosophical phenomena as the Neo-Thomism of Gilson and Maritain, the Neo-Calvinism of Reinhold Niebuhr, and a variety of evidences of the limitations of rationalism ranging from Whitehead's measured demonstrations to the enthusiastic mysticism of Kierkegaard and his progeny.

Whether all this amounts to a revival of religious influence is another question again. It is certainly true that a lot of people have been losing faith in the old rational liberal hope of progress through enlightened self-interest. Many find no hope at all; only a sort of adaptation through varieties of stoicism. The reception

on Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Auden's latest poems is perhaps a pertinent example: they met with almost universal approval and extraordinary respect—mostly, I should say, on the grounds of their content rather than their technique. Some have even maintained that the *Quartets* might set the pattern for this generation as *The Waste Land* did for the last. It is possible that they are right. But I should consider that example a dangerous one which few are equipped to follow with success. It seems to me that genuine religious experience requires for its possession qualities which are rare, special and difficult to train. What I should fear—and I think there have already been examples—would be earnest attempts to follow the mode without possessing the experience. In an application more general than the practice of poetry that is what I am inclined to think we already have: a widespread feeling that it would be fine if we had a more religious society, without much real belief either in a transcendental direction or the possibility of moral absolutes.

The kind of controversy which results from all this may be suggested by the *affaire* Dreiser. Dreiser's posthumous novel *The Bulwark* has recently astounded his naturalistic tradition by turning out to be a kind of parable of Quaker piety. The book, it is true, is written with such insensitivity to tone that it is something of a problem to know just what Dreiser intended its values to be. Apparently he meant to trace in it the development of his Quaker hero through suffering, from a moralistic code of negatives to an embracing love for all living creatures, along with submission to a cosmic if unfathomable purpose. Certainly in spite of its appalling style the book has, in its closing pages, a moving sincerity. In recognition of that, no doubt, it has been praised by F. O. Matthiessen, one of the most respected of liberal critics, for its 'emotional depth', for cutting 'through the dry formalism of the American mind' and making 'like Melville, a reassertion of the heart'. It has also been condemned by Lionel Trilling in a review in which his distrust of Dreiser's moral adequacy, his dislike for easy reconciliation in the face of disaster are really subordinate to the blame he metes out to the liberal American intellectual for preferring, at this moment, heart to mind.

Both Mr Matthiessen and Mr Trilling (though Mr Trilling nervously denies that he is a partner to it) recall in their reviews



## The Literary Situation in America

the symposium which consumed a good deal of *The Partisan Review* several years ago accusing the intellectuals of a failure of nerve. The writers in that series—notably Sidney Hook and John Dewey—were asserting the old liberal faith in the power of the free intelligence to work out rational solutions to the problems posed by humanity's needs, desires, and abilities. They were defending empirical scientific study as method; a rational society as the desired result. They were attacking what they took to be, not without evidence, an increasing reliance on a variety of non-rational beliefs: on religious authority, on traditional moral authority, or even on the philosophical pessimism (including reconciliation) which comes from a prepossession with mankind's inscrutable and irrational nature. They were affirming an old faith: that the mind, though it must consider the needs of the heart, must still rule.

Given these arguments one could only expect that Karl Shapiro's *Essay on Rime*, which deplors the 'failure in belief' and appears to regard poetry as in need of more heart and less mind, would not only be regarded as evidence but would itself become a subject of controversy, with much the same parties on each side. The sub-headings of this treatise on modern poetry are perhaps more revealing than the main title: they are in turn 'The Confusion in Prosody', 'The Confusion in Language', and 'The Confusion in Belief'. To my mind it is more a record than a righting of these confusions, somewhat confused itself by its habit of most condemning those whom it most admires. It is not a great work in itself; but it is a remarkably interesting revelation of the state of the American literary mind. Consequently it seems to me equally excessive either to castigate Shapiro for formulating the uncertainties which almost any honest contemporary mind must confess to feeling, or to praise him overmuch for discovering new doctrine and new clarification.

The other evidences of the distrust of the pure critical intelligence are not so direct. But it can be recorded that Freud has recently been a more potent inspiration than Marx. For one thing there has been a considerable vogue in the past two or three years for novels based on abnormal psychology, like Charles Jackson's *The Lost Weekend*, a saga of dipsomania, and Mary Jane Ward's

*The Snake Pit*, an account of life in an insane asylum.<sup>1</sup> Psychological thrillers have become matter for earnest literary controversy, though the best of them are still foreign imports like the works of Graham Greene and Georges Simenon; perhaps one might add here Albert Camus's *The Stranger*. But of course with *The Stranger* it is the more high-brow implications which have been chiefly noted; the stir over existentialism generally has been enormous. Perhaps we admire the French elegance in these matters as an offset to the dullness of our own controversies; but it may also have been a recommendation to the spirit of our times that the existentialists appear to have arrived at the gloomiest possible conclusions by a method both intellectual and mystical, so that their mystery has been discussed by all parties with avidity if not exactly clarity.

It is probably also in character that the surrealists have become quite chic, though I hasten to add that this is in general a public, not a literary development. Always before a style with which to shock the bourgeois, surrealism has recently become one with which to delight them. It is the recognized style with which to adorn the dust jackets of horrors and thrillers; it is widely used to identify the ultra-fashionable in store windows. No musical comedy without a dream sequence (usually ballet) can get inside Broadway doors. Even Hollywood recognized its peculiar charms and some time ago imported Dali himself to do a scene for *Spellbound*, one of a series of studies of mania which have swept the cinema screens. Meanwhile, in the somewhat more rarefied world of surrealist reading matter, there have been three variously new magazines chiefly devoted to surrealist culture (*View*, *Circle*, and *Hemispheres*). Unfortunately we have never had much in the way of genuine native surrealism, though we have imported some (even Henry Miller, a recent re-import, is at his best an impulsive realist). The manifesto of the party has always been the expression of the true man through the unconscious; most recent American efforts appear rather to exhibit an arch self-consciousness.

It may be appropriate to resume all this in Krazy Kat's terms—or rather in terms of E. E. Cummings's *Foreword to Krazy*, as

<sup>1</sup> A parallel in criticism can perhaps be detected in the giving over of much of the space in *Partisan Review* to discussion of the relation between art and psycho-analysis. See e.g. the issues for Winter 1945, Summer 1945, Fall 1945, Jan.-Feb. 1947, and March-April 1947.

## The Literary Situation in America

published some time ago in *The Sewanee Review*.<sup>1</sup> Krazy Kat is a comic-strip character inevitably pursued (with a brick) by a malevolent undermouse called Ignatz and inevitably protected (unsuccessfully) by a benevolent overdog called Offisa Pup. 'The meteoric burlesque melodrama of democracy', says Cummings, 'is a struggle between society (Offisa Pup) and the individual (Ignatz Mouse) over an ideal (our heroine)—a struggle from which, again and again and again, emerges one stupendous fact; namely, that the ideal of democracy fulfils herself only if, and whenever, society fails to suppress the individual.' This is to say almost the same thing as did D. S. Savage in a letter from England in *The Sewanee Review* two issues earlier: 'that the central social issue of our time is not an external struggle between collectives, but an inward conflict issuing in a struggle between individual persons and the collective *as such*'. But the force of Cummings's paradox better represents the American temper: we being relatively naïve about these problems of the collective, the discovery that ultra-progressive and super-benevolent Offisa Pup may not have the total solution to our dilemma is a paradoxical betrayal of intellectual law and order. 'Alas for sensical reformers!' says Cummings. The ambiguity is fitting: alas not only that they are, but that they are denied. Certainly the denial of the sensical faith has produced some odd varieties of sensationalism, subjectivism, and mysticism. But it is not entirely a failure of nerve. It is perhaps the logical consequence of our development over the last two decades: an honest doubt whether even if we achieved the political reformation envisaged in the thirties we should not still have the human ills, the machine culture, the regimentation, the sterilization of the cities, against which the writers of the twenties protested. What else remains is an unsolved problem: unsolved, to use Mr Savage's terms again, both in personal life and by literary talent. Maybe when somebody's conviction replaces almost everybody's doubt and confusion, something will come of it.

<sup>1</sup> Spring 1946.

## NEW CONTRIBUTORS

HARRY LEVIN is an Associate Professor of English at Harvard University. He is best known in this country as editor of the 'Nonesuch' Ben Jonson and the author of a study of James Joyce. His most recent publications, however, are a study of Stendhal issued by New Directions and a selection of Joyce's work in the Viking 'Portables'. ANDREWS WANNING is a member of the department of English at Harvard. He has contributed to several literary periodicals including *Partisan Review* and *Confluences* and is completing a book on Seventeenth Century Prose. E. E. CUMMINGS' most recent books of poems are 50 *Poems* (Henry Holt, New York, 1940), *IXI* (Henry Holt, 1944), and *Santa Claus, A Morality* (Henry Holt, 1946). An all-Cummings issue of *The Harvard Wake* was published early in 1946. BYRON VAZAKAS has contributed to most American literary periodicals, including *Partisan Review* and *The Sewanee Review*. All his poems are in the same stanza form as *Contrast for November*. A collection of them, *Transfigured Night*, has recently been published by Macmillan, New York, with a preface by William Carlos Williams. C. BUSBY SMITH's poetry has appeared in *Transformation*, *Poetry Quarterly* and *The Windmill*. G. H. BANTOCK is writing a book on L. H. Myers. The essay published here is based in part on lectures delivered by him to the London Forum. THOMAS GOOD's poetry has appeared in several periodicals, and his criticism has been printed in *Transformation*. WALLACE FOWLIE is now an exchange lecturer in the Department of Modern Languages at Chicago University. His most recent publications are *The Spirit of France* (Sheed and Ward, 1944) and *Rimbaud: the Myth of Childhood* (Dennis Dobson, 1946). He has also recently edited an all Valéry issue of *The Quarterly Review of Literature*. CLIFFORD COLLINS is an editor of *The Critic* and of *Politics and Letters*. ARTHUR MIZENER is Professor of English at Carleton College. He has published poetry and criticism in most American magazines including *Partisan Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Sewanee Review*.



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